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A Bad Lot.*

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"A TRAGIC BLUNDER," etc., etc.

CHAPTER X.

THE FIRST LINES OF THE ROMANCE.

JULIAN TEMPLE is standing on the bear-skin hearthrug in Mrs. Roscoe's drawing-room in Rutland Gate. It was not the first time he had dined at her house, and on a previous occasion when he had done so, he had registered a vow as he left her door that he would never be inveigled into dining with her again; for if her cook was unimpeachable, her friends bored him, and to be bored was, as I think I have already mentioned, the bugbear of Mr. Temple's existence.

Yet here he was again, very much against his inclinations, undergoing the usual penance of the *mauvais quart d'heure* before dinner, in a room full of people who were all of them utterly uncongenial to him.

The fact was that he had yielded to Cecil's earnest and personal entreaties on the subject. Cecil had appeared one day at his rooms in Piccadilly bearing his mother's invitation card in his hand; it was the morning after she had invited Nell.

"For Heaven's sake come and help me out, Temple," Cecil had entreated, when he saw that Julian began to shake his head doubtfully over the note. "My mother has asked my girl to this party—it was very grudgingly done, and I was in a mortal fear that she would take no notice of her at all, save leaving cards at

the door. She flatly refused to let me bring her to see her, she said it would agitate her too much, and that her doctor tells her her heart is weak, and that she must avoid 'scenes,' and all sorts of excuses of that kind. But she happened to have got this dinner party on, and just at the last moment she said she would ask her to it, if I could find another man to make the number right, so do, like a good chap, come and help me out. I want the evening to go off well, and you to talk to her a bit, and make it pleasant to her."

And so, to oblige Cecil, he had accepted the invitation. He was calling himself a fool for his pains just now, as he looked round upon the assembling guests. An octogenarian earl, who was Mrs. Roscoe's chief and only aristocratic card, and his aged countess—he, weakly garrulous with the weight of years, and she, very deaf and dull; a bland and smiling city potentate, an ex-lord mayor who had been knighted during the period of his mayoralty in honour of the birth of some royal baby; his wife, broad and bland like her husband, and very much over-dressed without being well dressed, in salmon-coloured satin; a wealthy stockbroker of swarthy complexion and Hebraic features, with diamond studs in his shirt front; his wife, a dark-browed lady, like unto himself, with a perfect shop front of jewellery displayed upon and about her capacious bosom. There were also a couple of men of uncertain age, and of insignificant and unrefined exterior, and a thin young lady very smartly dressed, who sat by herself upon a distant sofa, and looked intensely miserable.

Amongst all these people Julian Temple looked like some one out of another hemisphere.

Without being in the least handsome, he possessed nevertheless that air of distinction which ensures superiority to a man in almost any company in which he may find himself. It was impossible to pass him over in a crowd. He had the perfectly quiet and self-contained manners of a man who is born to the best society, and who at thirty-eight years of age has learnt to understand, without over estimating, his own position in the world.

In appearance he was a somewhat largely built man; tall and broad-shouldered, with a complexion tanned to a healthy red brown; his hair was so liberally sprinkled with grey that it was impossible now to do more than guess at its original colour;

his eyebrows were brown and well defined; his eyes deep set, dark blue, and kindly; his nose rather large, his mouth, that was partially concealed by a tawny brown moustache, of a singular and almost womanly sweetness—his chin, on the other hand, was square and resolute, cleft with a deep dimple in the centre; he was always very carefully dressed, although there was nothing about his toilette that could suggest the exaggerations of fashion or foppery.

If I have gone somewhat minutely into this description of Julian Temple's personal appearance, it is because no man on earth ever bore his character more plainly inscribed upon his face than he did. There was in him a mixture of strength and of weakness, of manliness and womanly gentleness, of stern resolution almost amounting to obstinacy—that at times was liable to be utterly swept away by a softness of heart that would as often as not make shipwreck of his best considered determinations. Such a man may be uncertain in his moods and tempers—he may even be inconsistent and undependable—but with it all he is almost invariably lovable.

Mr. Temple stood in the middle of Mrs. Roscoe's hearthrug and looked, as indeed he felt, like a fish out of water.

The heroine of the evening had not yet arrived, and in spite of the unsympathetic nature of his surroundings, he experienced a decided and growing curiosity to see Cecil's *flancie*.

It soon became apparent to him that she was the last, and that she was late.

He overheard a whispered word or two between Mrs. Roscoe and Mrs. Torrens:

"I should not wait," he heard the latter say.

"My dear, it is only five minutes after the hour! I think we had better wait another moment or two. Cecil would be so much annoyed if we went down without her."

"It is very bad taste on her part to be late," rejoined the elder lady, ill-temperedly.

"Poor little soul!" thought Julian to himself pityingly as they moved away together.

Cecil was apparently ill at ease—he fidgeted about the room from one person to another, making irrelevant remarks about the weather, and moving away again without waiting for a response, with his head and eyes constantly turned towards the door.

A few minutes ago he had taken Julian up to the sad-faced young lady on the sofa, and had introduced her to him as Miss Vincent. Mr. Temple, who was at least grateful to the octogenarian peer for saving him from the honour of taking down his hostess, merely bowed and retired again to his hearthrug; he said to himself that it would be hard enough to find subjects of conversation with that girl through dinner—there was surely no need to begin the exhaustive process beforehand.

An elderly gentleman near him, who was discussing the rise and fall of the commercial markets with the Israelitish stock-broker, answered also to the name of Vincent—he took him to be the father of his fate.

How deadly uninteresting all these people were!

Mr. Temple groaned internally, and wished again for the twentieth time that he had never been such a fool as to come.

At last the door opened again, and the butler announced—"Miss Eleanor Forrester."

From that moment Julian Temple ceased to regret that he was dining in Rutland Gate.

He thought her the loveliest creature he had ever set eyes on. She wore a dress of pale blue gauze—it was very shabby, and a little faded in colour, and was made according to the cut and fashion of two seasons ago. It was a garment that had, in fact, belonged to Dottie, and had been hurriedly cut down and taken in, and otherwise furbished up by the united efforts of home labours—maids and mistresses—in order to render Nell presentable for her visit to London. But Nell's beauty was of that rare and high order that can scarcely be marred by any dress, however ill-made and old fashioned. The faded blue did but set off the brilliance of her hair and eyes and the exquisite tints of her complexion, and the tumbled and creased folds fell deftly into the lines of her slender figure, and gathered themselves with a natural grace about her rounded bosom and dainty waist. There was a frightened look in her beautiful grey eyes as she came alone into the large room full of strangers, yet she carried her small head high, and there was a thorough-bred look about her that set her far away above every other woman in the room.

Julian became deeply and intensely interested in her entrance; he saw that her red lips were parted, and that her white bosom

fluttered, and he guessed that her heart must be beating with nervousness at the formidable nature of this public reception, and he hated the mother and the aunt of his friend, and his friend too, into the bargain, for allowing her to be subjected to such a cruel ordeal.

Cecil had hastened to her side, and it seemed to Julian that his whispered greeting to her must contain a scolding, for he caught the words of her faint excuse—"I am really very sorry, but the cab was so slow. I thought the horse would have tumbled on his nose."

Then Mrs. Roscoe came forward and shook hands with her exactly as she had done with all her other guests, with just a stereotyped word or two of pleasure at seeing her, calling out almost in the same breath to the butler over her head—"Dinner at once, please."

So that Nell felt immediately that she was in disgrace, and that her lateness was accounted unto her as a sin. Mrs. Torrens also exchanged a few cold words with her—mainly about the weather and the unsatisfactory nature of cabs—after which she was deposited in a chair, Cecil hanging rather feebly about her for the few remaining minutes upstairs.

As to Nell, she was too bewildered and, if the truth be told too mortified, to see anybody or anything for some few moments. It was only after she found herself seated at the long dinner table that she gathered heart and courage to look about her. All that she saw dismayed and oppressed her. The very table, laden with flowers and with silver, with rose-coloured paper shades to soften the light, and the rich smells of well-cooked dishes pervading the atmosphere—although it was only the ordinary dinner party aspect of the commonplace London banquet—was an astonishment and a revelation to her. If this was the way that Cecil had been accustomed to live—if this glitter of silver and glass, these dainty dishes, this never ending succession of wines—this oppressive sense of state and splendour were the natural attributes of his home, then how squalid and beggarly, how ill-arranged and disorderly must not Marshlands and its happy-go-lucky life appear in his eyes! And then the people! There were sixteen of them in all—enough surely to be merry and happy together—yet it seemed to Nell that she had never seen so many dull and uninterested

faces gathered together. They talked in bated tones ; there was a sort of murmur that went round, interspersed with intervals of silence ; their knives and forks in fact often drowned the sound of their voices.

There was never a laugh that seemed to be spontaneous, nor a jest exchanged, nor an eye that shone and sparkled with responsive pleasure. The smiles, like the voices, were cold, and forced, and measured. Cecil sat intrenched about with dowagers at the end of the table—the mayor's lady on his left talked about the new county councillors, whilst he did his best to convey her remarks second-hand down the ear trumpet of the aged countess on his right. People to the right and left of Nell talked about the most uninteresting things ; they mainly discussed mutual acquaintances, and their sayings and doings, or related dreary anecdotes concerning the seaside or country outings that every one had just come back from. They compared the relative prices of hotels, and the beneficial effects that the air and the change had had upon their respective healths.

An elderly gentleman with a sallow complexion and lanky black hair had escorted Nell into dinner, and presently as in duty bound he attempted to enter into conversation with her.

"Do you consider London full for the time of the year ?" he inquired politely.

"I really don't know," answered Nell ; "I was never in London at this time of the year before."

"Indeed !" he ejaculated, looking round at her for a moment as if she had said something very remarkable. After which he finished his soup in silence.

"Did you ever eat turtle soup at a Mansion House dinner ?" was his next venture—suggested no doubt by the fluid he had just consumed.

"I have never eaten turtle soup anywhere in my life," replied Nell with a laugh.

And after that her neighbour gave her up. He probably considered her past praying for.

Nell sat in absolute silence for a seemingly endless period. The fish—two kinds—went round in succession ; then came sweetbreads. She had no heart to eat, she felt too utterly crushed and miserable, like a stranded creature in a strange land, her only friend divided from her by a barricade of flowers

and a wilderness of glass and silver, and so absorbed in his duties as a host to the old ladies on either side of him, that he could not even find time to give her a glance.

He might have looked at her now and then, thought Nell, who about this period began to experience a childish desire to cry. A little smile across the crowd of strange faces would have been such a help to her! But Cecil—although she did not know it—would have thought such a proceeding the height of indecorum. He was in love with her, but not so much in love as to render him oblivious of the conventionalities of society.

Just at this moment when things were at their worst with her, some one on the other side turned round squarely in his chair and said to her with a very bright and winning smile:

"Well, Miss Forrester, and what are you thinking about, I wonder?"

She felt some surprise at hearing herself addressed by name, but the kind eyes and the pleasant face won her confidence at once.

"I was thinking," she said in a lowered voice, with a little answering gleam of fun in her upturned eyes, "the thoughts of an outlaw—I fear!"

"And what are they? You can tell me safely, because I am an outlaw too—at heart."

"I was thinking how deadly dull, respectable society seems to be," she replied in a lowered voice.

Julian Temple laughed. "Have you come to that conclusion already?"

"Is it *always* like this?" inquired Nell almost with awe.

"The average London dinner party is usually framed much on the same lines; sometimes it is of a higher standard of intelligence, sometimes lower; this represents a very fair average, I should say."

"Then what on earth makes people dine out? If it is only for the food, they might have the same dishes at home, and save themselves the weariness of eating them in public."

"The food, I fancy, is only the secondary consideration—sometimes it is very secondary. I must admit," added Temple, with all a man's generous appreciation of a good dinner, "that Mrs. Roscoe's cook is an admirable person; but alas! even that solace is not always at hand to counterbalance the tedium of these functions."

"Then why do people give dinner parties at all?"

"The whole system of dinner-giving in London is based upon a principle of give and take. There is a tacit understanding that the entertained shall pay back the entertainer in kind. 'I ask you to dinner and you must ask me back again,' is the scarcely veiled compact in the dinner-giving world. 'Or else, if you can't repay my dinner by giving me one in return, you must make it worth my while to invite you. You must contribute good looks, smart clothes, clever conversation or vocal accomplishments; you must in short make yourself of some use or value to me in order to recoup me for the food you consume!'"

Nell looked up at him quietly and meditatively for half a moment, and then she said with a little gleam of malice in the corner of her eye: "I wonder why you came here to-night!"

His eyes met hers with a curious expression in them. "If I gave you twenty guesses you would never find out," he said smiling. "So I will tell you at once. I came here for you."

"For *me*!" she repeated in amazement, a wave of colour flooding her sensitive face.

"Yes; solely and simply for you! To talk to you, to amuse you, to make friends with you! Don't look so astonished! I am an old friend of Cecil's, and he wanted me to know you. I have sympathized with him about his engagement, and now more than ever, since I have seen you. You poor little thing," he added on a sudden impulse, lowering his voice and bending down a little towards the shell-like ear and the pure sweet profile that was now turned towards him, "I am so sorry, it was so hard on you!"

She knew at once instinctively what he meant. That he was thinking of her entrance—of her first meeting with Cecil's mother—of Cecil himself, too far off to render her any help or countenance. Her grateful eyes flashed up her thanks into his. What bewildering eyes they were! Something, he knew not what, smote suddenly through his veins. A warm gladness—a sense of joy indescribable. It was as though some one had opened to him a door into some unknown and lovely land where, if he might not enter, he might at least stand at the threshold and gaze his fill.

"Now, we must be real friends, you and I," he said, after a moment of strange and sympathetic silence. "You must tell me

about your home in Fenshire. I know some people down there." He did not mention their name, deeming that they would not be acquaintances, and not wishing to embarrass her. "Sometimes I go there for shooting—indeed I believe I am going there next week. Do you know it is the fashion to call Fenshire flat and ugly, but I always think there is a curious fascination about it."

"Oh yes, is there not!" she assented eagerly. "It has a charm of its own, different to every other country. It is so wide, so breezy, and so changeful in colouring," and then she found herself telling him all about the sunset views from her bedroom window, the red glow across the level plains, and the pearly greys of dusk; about the flights of birds wending southwards in the autumn, the wild ducks that swirled across the marshes towards the evening sky. Then, again, she described to him how in the winter, wild storms swept over the lowering heavens, and how the winds soughed and sobbed all night long amongst the chimney-stacks of her home. She drew these pictures vividly and graphically with an artist's touch in her language, and with all the fervour of a keen and impassioned lover of nature in all her moods.

He found himself listening with more and more interest, and more and more eagerness. He wondered vaguely if she talked liked that to Cecil, or if she did, whether he understood her. The imaginative faculty in her, and the picturesque language in which she clothed some of her fanciful ideas, appealed to him strongly. He found himself talking to her back again as he had never talked before to any one, telling her of a thought that had lain for long, deep in the depths of his mind. It was the sketch of a romance, to be called "*The Romance of Risen Souls*," who were to sweep through the world on the wings of the storm winds, revisiting the scenes of their earthly abodes; of how they would find others filling the places that had once been theirs, and of how the remorseless winds would catch them up again and hurry them onwards.

It was wonderful how this girl entered into his thought and grasped the details of this somewhat eccentric fantasy. Once or twice, indeed, she suggested something entirely new to him, some improvement on his own idea. The vividness of her conceptions and the quickness of her comprehension surprised and delighted him.

"If that book is ever written, we must certainly collaborate,"

he said at last with a smile, recalling himself with an effort to a lighter frame of mind. "After all that you have said, I could never write it alone!"

"I hope—I hope—I have not said very foolish things," said Nell timidly, becoming once more the little shy country girl he had thought her at first. "One has so many odd fancies of which one never speaks, and it is good of you to have let me talk to you about mine."

"I have never enjoyed anything more in my life than listening to them," he said earnestly. "Some of your thoughts are beautiful. I have never met a keener appreciation of the effects of sky and weather in any artist I have known."

Nell blushed with pleasure.

"Ah, that is all because I have been born and bred in the dear fen country. Come and see it soon."

"I will, very soon," he answered, his eyes meeting hers more eagerly than perhaps he had any idea of.

After the ladies had gone upstairs, Julian strolled round to where Cecil was sitting.

"Well," the young barrister looked up eagerly, "how did she get on?" he asked a little anxiously. "She is lovely, isn't she? Did she find anything to talk about?"

"She talked better than any one I have met for a long time, my dear fellow. Your *fiancée* is not only beautiful in face, Cecil—she has a very beautiful and poetical mind."

"Has she?" said Cecil, looking rather astonished and puzzled. Nell was lovely and sweet and fascinating, certainly, but that she possessed a mind at all was a considerable surprise to him.

"Oh! Well, old man, I am glad you got on with her," he said lightly after half a moment's pause.

"He does not appreciate her in the very least," thought Julian.

CHAPTER XI.

MISS VINCENT'S PAINTED CUSHION.

UPSTAIRS, they talked about their servants.

Nell sat by herself upon a sofa, and for some time nobody spoke to her. Mrs. Roscoe had flung herself heart and soul into

a sympathetic discussion with the aged peeress over the shortcomings of her housekeeper. Mrs. Torrens bemoaned herself to the ex-lady mayoress over the general flightiness and love of finery displayed by maidservants of the present day, and a little way off two younger married ladies poured out mutual confidences, in bated voices, concerning their experiences in the feeding of young infants, diversified by anecdotes of the goings on of their respective nursery-maids.

Nell sipped her coffee, and wished herself back in Wimpole Street. Old Lady Forrester, with her caustic remarks, her little cynical speeches, half humorous, half bitter, was infinitely more amusing, she thought, than all these dull, prosy women, who had not, it seemed to her, two ideas in their heads. She tried to shut her ears to the senseless and brainless chatter, and to recall every word of her late conversation with her neighbour at dinner. There was a little flutter of excitement in her mind about him. She had never met any one quite like him before. He attracted and interested her, and she hoped that he would speak to her again when the gentlemen came upstairs. At this moment the dull-faced young lady came over from the other side of the room and sat down beside her.

"I think I must introduce myself to you, Miss Forrester, although, of course, you must know all about me already from Cecil. I am Ida Vincent."

Nell smiled and bowed, but did not quite know what remark was expected of her.

"Of course Cecil has talked to you of me," continued Miss Vincent, "for I am the oldest friend he has in the world."

"Indeed? I can't exactly remember, but you see I have not known Cecil very long."

"No; so I understand. You can certainly not know him as I do, Miss Forrester. He and I have been dear friends since our childhood."

There was a certain aggressiveness about the way these words were spoken, that made Nell feel vaguely uncomfortable. She did not know why Miss Vincent should be at such pains to point out her own superior knowledge of Cecil to her.

"You cannot know as I do," went on Miss Vincent, warming to her subject, "how superior he is to most men—how clever

and wise, and how good and honourable is his nature. You are a very fortunate girl, Miss Forrester."

"I am glad you think so," answered Nell without any enthusiasm. She had no intention of discussing Cecil's character with this young lady, whose remarks struck her as being in singularly bad taste. In order to change the subject she inquired: "Can you tell me the name of the gentleman who sat between us at dinner?"

"The gentleman who took me down, and who talked to you all the time, you mean?" said Ida with a little spiteful laugh. "Not that you were not perfectly welcome to him. I think he is a dreadful person, although he is a friend of Cecil's. His name is Mr. Julian Temple."

"Why is he a dreadful person?" asked Nell, with amusement.

"I do not like that type of man. I have never met him before, and I never wish to meet him again, for I have heard that he is one of those unscrupulous society men-about-town whose chief amusement is to draw people out—inexperienced girls especially, whom he considers fair prey—and then he makes fun of them afterwards, and repeats everything they say to the next person he talks to. I consider that sort of thing most reprehensible, don't you?"

"Certainly, if it is true. I may not have your experience, Miss Vincent, but I can hardly believe that Mr. Temple is the kind of person you describe."

And after that Nell became rather thoughtful, and only answered in monosyllables.

Miss Vincent said a great many other things to her, chiefly in praise of Cecil and of his mother and his aunt, whom she said were the kindest and dearest women in the world.

"I live three doors off, you see," she said, "so I have every opportunity of knowing how good they are. Nothing can exceed their kindness to myself, for instance. My father is a great deal away, and my mother is an invalid, and is obliged to go to bed early every evening, and dear Mrs. Roscoe likes me to bring my work and sit with them in the evenings—I am almost like one of the family, I may say—and a dearer, kinder woman than Mrs. Roscoe does not exist on earth."

Nell suddenly turned round and considered her companion

attentively. Ida's face, now she looked at it again, bore an expression that was not altogether attractive. She began to perceive instinctively that this young lady had no friendly feeling towards her, and that all these things were being said simply in order to make her feel uncomfortable. There was a spice of malice in these reiterated assertions of her own well-established footing in the family, as spoken to the girl to whom nobody paid any particular attention, although she was to be the wife of the son of the house.

"Do you think Mrs. Roscoe is particularly kind to me, Miss Vincent?" she inquired suddenly. "I am to marry her son, as you know, and she has never seen me before. She asks me to this formal dinner party, and as you see she has not yet spoken a dozen words to me. Now am I to believe her to be the kind-hearted woman you describe in the face of this marked unkindness to myself?"

"Oh, of course, Miss Forrester, I cannot answer for what Mrs. Roscoe may do always. I only speak of people as I find them. To me, Mrs. Roscoe has always been goodness itself, but then I know she is very fond of me. She loves me—as a daughter almost!" added Ida, with an irrepressible desire to vaunt her superior position in Mrs. Roscoe's estimation to this girl who had come between Cecil and herself. "But for her he would have married me!" she thought, with a dull, miserable anger at her heart, and she hated Nell for her beauty and for her success.

She had said at first that she would not dine here to-night, and then a craving curiosity to see the girl who had taken Cecil from her, overcame her reluctance to accept the invitation. If she could have found her to be what she had heard the elder women say of her—vulgar, unladylike, loud in manner, and offensive in conversation, Ida would have extracted some amount of consolation out of it, but Nell's lovely face and quiet self-possessed manners, her success at dinner with a man she had always heard spoken of as something of a lion in society owing to his originality and his exclusiveness, and who had scarcely vouchsafed to speak a dozen words about the weather to herself, all increased her jealousy and her envy.

Ida had heard a great deal in these last days about Cecil's engagement, and about the extreme undesirableness of the Forrester connection. Mrs. Torrens was a person who always spoke

her mind, and she had not minced her words about her reminiscences of the Forresters as she remembered them in her younger days—even when Ida had been present. Sometimes, indeed, she had gone so far, that Mrs. Roscoe, with greater discretion, had placed a warning finger upon her lip, and murmured “hush,” with a side glance at Ida’s thin figure stooping under the lamp light over her fancy work.

“Oh, Ida is a child, she won’t understand,” Mrs. Torrens had answered carelessly.

But Ida was no child, and she understood perfectly. She understood that this marriage was considered by his mother and aunt to be a disastrous thing for Cecil—that the girl had no money, and that her people were not visited by anybody in Fenshire, which surely pointed to something very disreputable in their antecedents! Ida knew, moreover, that she herself would have been highly acceptable to them as a wife for Cecil. She had had three proposals of marriage in her life, not one of the aspirants to her hand and fortune being under fifty years of age, but as her affections were centred upon Cecil Roscoe, she had dismissed her elderly suitors with immediate and decisive promptitude. She was aware that about a year ago her father and Mrs. Roscoe had had a little private interview together, of which she herself was the subject.

“Of course, my girl might have looked higher than a barrister in poor practice,” Mr. Vincent had stated on that occasion, very frankly and openly; “but still I gather that she is fond of your son, and we are old friends, Mrs. Roscoe, and I should be quite satisfied to see her happily married to him. It will save me a world of trouble and my poor wife too; for we neither of us can go trotting Ida out to parties in order to find her a husband,” and then Mr. Vincent had proceeded to state the sum that he would be prepared to “lay down” at his daughter’s marriage, and the further sum she would inherit at his death. And these details had caused the mouth of Cecil’s mother to water with desire and longing, for the sums mentioned appeared to her to be fabulous.

“Of course, you must understand that my son would never consent to give up his profession to live upon his wife’s money,” said Mrs. Roscoe proudly, with a due regard to her own and Cecil’s dignity.

"Quite right," answered Mr. Vincent cordially. "I should be very sorry if he did. I am a business man myself, and approve of work for a young man."

"And dear Mr. Vincent, if on that account alone—that he may get on at the Bar, and establish himself thoroughly before entering upon a new life—I do not wish my boy to marry for the next two or three years."

"Oh, well, I am in no hurry to get rid of my girl. We would rather keep her at home, in fact, as long as we can, though we shall be glad to feel that her future is settled. A year or two of waiting won't hurt either of them, and we are too near neighbours to run away from each other."

And so they thought they had settled everything very comfortably. This conversation had taken place more than a year ago, and from the date of it there had existed a tacit understanding between Mr. and Mrs. Vincent on the one side and Mrs. Roscoe and Mrs. Torrens on the other, but it was agreed that the young people should be left in ignorance of this compact of their elders. Ida, however, had known all about it from the first, for she had wormed every detail of the momentous interview out of her mother.

From that time the friendship between the two families was still further cemented. Ida was pressed to come to the house whenever she liked, and she got into the habit of running in and out of it at all hours of the day. She was always welcomed warmly; the two ladies without being actually mercenary would have been less than human had they not looked at her through the glorified halo of her father's money bags, and to do them justice they were in addition sincerely fond of her. Ida was docile and deferential; her manners were quiet and her shyness and lack of conversation were no drawback in their eyes.

They said to each other that she was ladylike and modest; and in some people's opinion it is scarcely necessary, or even desirable, for a woman to be anything more. Had she been a little cleverer, Ida might have found out for herself that Cecil treated her as a sister or a cousin, but was never likely to regard her as anything else. But perhaps she could not, and very certainly she did not, wish to see this—she preferred to receive all the pettings and the flattering encouragements from his mother and aunt, and to cheat

herself into the fancy that he himself was ready to fall in with the views of his elders.

The blow of his engagement fell very heavily upon her. After all these hopes and plans, these tacit understandings and secret arrangements for his welfare, it was hard indeed upon them all that everything should be so unexpectedly and fatally upset by Cecil himself; and, of course, as Ida really cared for him, it fell harder on her than on any one else. Her nature, which was a somewhat narrow and cold one, might, under the sunshine of love and happiness, not improbably have expanded into something better and nobler. She had seemed a sweet and good girl to Cecil's mother during the time that all had promised brightly for her future. Perhaps, had everything gone on well and smoothly, she might have remained sweet and good to the end of the chapter. But Ida was one of those people—and they are without number in the world—upon whom adversity has an evil and a deteriorating effect. All the surface goodness and sweetness seemed to be burnt and dried up in her by this cruel stroke of fortune. There remained nothing but the soured and somewhat spiteful substratum which had perhaps always lain dormant at the base of her disposition. Hatred and envy of her more fortunate rival, and a wild desire to do something—she knew not what—to upset her happiness and to snatch Cecil back to herself, filled her whole heart. To-night, for the first time, all these thoughts began to take a definite shape within her. A few days ago she had overheard Mrs. Roscoe say to her sister-in-law:

"All is not lost yet. Cecil has promised me that the marriage shall not take place before Easter. Between this and then who knows what may not happen! He may come to see with his own eyes that such a marriage can never bring him happiness. Bad parents make bad children, and no daughter of that house can inherit anything but evil tendencies."

Ida had treasured up that speech in her heart. She was thinking of it now as she sat by Nell's side, looking with scarcely veiled repulsion at the lovely face of Cecil's betrothed.

"What can she do for him, a penniless girl with not even respectable connections?" she thought—"whereas papa's money would help him on in the world—push him in his profession, and perhaps enable him to go into Parliament by-and-bye."

Nell, who did not understand her, yet who began to dislike her

a little, was playing with the tassels of a sofa cushion against which she happened to be leaning. It was a white satin cushion with an Italian landscape painted upon it surrounded by a wreath of roses. It was certainly not a work of high art, yet there was a certain effective prettiness about it. Nell still held her coffee cup in her hand, and Miss Vincent offered politely to put it down for her. A little coffee was left in the cup, and somehow, in transferring it from one to the other, the cup slipped in the saucer, and some of it was spilt upon the satin cushion.

A mere trifle is frequently enough to influence a whole after-life, and although one never ceases to wonder at the infinitesimal causes which so often move the machinery of human events, yet the only wonder should be that the insignificant incidents of existence do not oftener bring about greater results.

A few drops of coffee accidentally spilt upon a sofa cushion—nothing more important than that! And yet in after days the little incident was destined to return to Nell's memory with an almost startling significance.

With an exclamation of regret, she tried to wipe off the stain with her pocket handkerchief.

"I am so dreadfully sorry; I am afraid it must have been my fault. It will spoil the cushion, coffee stains are so hard to get out—and it is exactly in the middle of the landscape, on the blue of the sky!"

"Oh, never mind," said Ida, "it doesn't signify; and perhaps I can do something to put it right. I painted it originally, so I ought to be able to do something."

"You painted it? How very clever of you!" And Nell, who was, secretly perhaps, a little anxious to propitiate this disagreeable young woman who was so much at home in Cecil's family, became outspoken in her admiration of the cushion.

"But it is beautifully done! You must have a great talent for painting, Miss Vincent. This is almost like a miniature, and I am sure it must be extremely difficult to produce such a delicate effect upon the texture of satin."

"Oh, no, it is not difficult when you have been taught how to do it," answered Ida, somewhat mollified by the admiration for an accomplishment on which she prided herself. "I took lessons from a lady at first, who showed me how to set about it. She sometimes gives me a lesson now; would you like to have her

address? It would be a great charity if you could recommend her. She is the widow of a clergyman; and she supports herself entirely by giving lessons in painting on ivory and on satin. She has regular employment in fan painting for two or three shops, but she is very glad of pupils as well."

All at once, whilst Miss Vincent was speaking, there flashed back into Nell's mind a vision of her girlish days. She seemed to see herself seated—one of a row of six unformed girls, all between the age of fourteen and fifteen—down one side of a bare dining-room table, whilst opposite them sat the vicar of the parish imparting religious instruction to the girl candidates of his confirmation class. It was a sad, dull room, with a dingy side-board at one end of it and a fireless grate at the other, although the room faced north and the afternoons were cold and chilly, and in front of the empty hearth stood a square screen in an old-fashioned mahogany frame, on which there was a painting—a shepherdess in a blue gown, with a crook in one hand and a bunch of red flowers in the other; behind her a green hill far away, on which sundry drab-coloured spots were dotted about. They might have been toadstools, but by the sense and context of the picture they were probably a flock of sheep browsing, and the whole scene was set upon a background of discoloured yellowish white satin. Then there would come a sharp voice recalling the wandering attention of the weary fourteen-year-old catechumen:

"Miss Eleanor Forrester, you are not attending to me in the least. I see that you are admiring my wife's beautiful handiwork. When the class is over you are quite at liberty to examine it, but just now kindly listen to me and answer the question I have put to you twice over. What were the names of the six cities of refuge appointed by Joshua for the children of Israel on the east side of the Jordan?"

Nell Forrester was not able to answer that all-important question; it is doubtful if, to this very day, she has ever rightly known the names of those cities of refuge; but the shepherdess upon the faded satin screen had always remained indelibly associated in her memory with that particular question, and with the somewhat dull and dry instruction imparted generally to confirmation classes held by the well-meaning but exceedingly prosy Mr. Hartwood, vicar of the parish of Marshlands. She thought

about that screen and the painted shepherdess now. A little sickening doubt fluttered uncertainly across her mind—and yet, how ridiculous! There must be hundreds of poor ladies in England who teach painting on satin, and amongst them many, no doubt, who are clergymen's wives and widows in straitened circumstances; nevertheless a vague repugnance, something indefinite and intangible, that she could not account for, made her shrink from inquiring the name of Miss Vincent's instructress.

"Oh, I am afraid it would be no use giving me her address, Miss Vincent, thank you all the same," she said a little hurriedly. "I am not at all clever, I am afraid. We none of us have any accomplishments, beyond the making of our own dresses. I am sure I could not be of any use to the lady," and then, to her unspeakable relief, the gentlemen entered the room, and Cecil came and sat down by her side.

"I wonder why she refused to be told her address!" said Ida Vincent to herself that night, when she was thinking over the events of the evening in her own bedroom; "she looked so oddly at me, and she turned quite pale first, and then quite red—and I think—I almost think—that she looked frightened!—I wonder why?"

CHAPTER XII.

ACROSS HYDE PARK.

NELL's visit to London, in so far as the primary object of it was concerned, was undoubtedly a failure.

To make friends with Cecil's people, and to ingratiate herself into the heart of his mother, had been the principal reasons for her coming to town; and when the last day of her visit came, he was forced to admit to himself that the effort had failed most woefully and lamentably. Mrs. Roscoe, as a matter of fact, had no intention of making friends with Nell Forrester; every step that she might have taken towards her, would have been, in her estimation, only a step in the wrong direction. Her chief desire was that the match might be broken off, and that Cecil might return, as she imagined, to his allegiance to Ida Vincent. Why, then, should she go out of her way to strengthen and cement this undesirable engagement—and to further the cause of an unwished-for daughter-in-law? "If you ever marry her, it will be time enough then to see about loving her," she had said to her

son, when he appealed to her earnestly—almost passionately—to be good to Nell.

"Time enough and to spare!" echoed Mrs. Torrens significantly and acidly.

Cecil was pacing impatiently up and down his mother's drawing-room, three days after the dinner party.

"I intend to marry her," he answered his mother, angrily and doggedly.

"Well, my dear boy, that remains to be seen. You, yourself, might change your mind. Of course, if you do marry her, then I shall endeavour to do my duty to her, for your sake."

Then Cecil went and knelt down by his mother's chair, and put his arms coaxingly about her.

"My dear mother, do try to like her a little for herself now. You must admire her; you must see how lovely and sweet she is."

"Beauty is but skin deep," croaked Mrs. Torrens from her corner, clicking her long knitting pins with a vicious ardour as she spoke.

Cecil went on without seeming to hear his aunt; he could not very well get up and take her by the shoulders and put her out of the room. Yet, short of these extreme measures, it would have been impossible to exclude her from the family councils. She was, perhaps, afraid that her sister-in-law might be overcome by maternal weakness if she herself was not at hand to give her support, for she never left her alone with her son in these days.

"Dearest mother, why are you so hard upon poor Nell?" continued the young man pleadingly. "I am willing to admit that there is much to be said against her family; I deplore all that side of the question quite as much as you do."

"Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers," ejaculated Mrs. Torrens behind him.

"But in Nell nobody can find a fault; it would be impossible!" he went on, disregarding the scriptural interpolation.

"My dear Cecil, I have really done all I can, at present," said Mrs. Roscoe irritably. "I have called on her, and I have had her here to dinner."

"As to calling, my dear mother, you can scarcely consider it a 'call,' seeing that you only just left your cards at the door!"

"Well, and how could we possibly set foot in the house of that wicked old woman, Lady Forrester!" cried out Mrs. Torrens fiercely. "Do you not know that she is the worst of the whole brood? A Forrester herself by birth, married to her first cousin—the vices of both branches of the family are centred in that woman—how can you imagine that your mother and I could enter her house!"

"I asked Miss Eleanor to dinner!" murmured Mrs. Roscoe plaintively and soothingly. "Surely I have done everything you have a right to expect of me, Cecil!"

"Of what use was it to ask her to a formal dinner party of sixteen people!" cried Cecil angrily. "What opportunity had you of improving your acquaintance with her in such a crowd—unless, indeed, you follow it up with something more?"

"But, my dear Cecil," remonstrated his mother, "is it desirable that I should put myself forward in order to encourage this disastrous affair? Oh, my dear boy, why need you go on with this miserable engagement? Why cannot you find your happiness with that dear good girl whom you have known all your life? who has no disreputable grandmother and mother—no shady out-at-elbows father and sisters to bring annoyance and discredit upon you—a girl whom you have known from her childhood upwards; whose pure innocent life is open to us all, and who, in addition, would bring you wealth and prosperity, and the certain security of a peaceful and well-ordered home. Oh, Cecil! why could you not have been content to find your happiness with her?"

"Are you talking about little Ida Vincent, mother?" inquired Cecil. "Good gracious!" and then he burst out laughing. "Why, I never thought about her in my life, nor should I ever have done so, even had I never met Nell Forrester! But really, dear mother, I don't think it is quite fair to bring Ida's name into this discussion, for I am quite sure she has nothing but the most sisterly regard for me."

Mrs. Roscoe burst into tears. "You are my only child!" she sobbed. "I had hoped so much for you, that you would have made such a good marriage."

Cecil felt distressed—he could not bear to see his mother cry. "Dearest mother, it may not be a good marriage in a wordly sense of the words, but do look at things in the

right way. If only one woman on earth can make a man happy, surely it is good for him to marry that one woman and none other? Even Aunt Torrens must admit that, I am sure," he added, turning towards the elder woman and holding out a propitiatory hand to her. For in these early days Cecil would have moved heaven and earth to have softened the hearts of these two women towards the girl he loved. Mrs. Torrens took his hand. She was just a little bit melted, for hard and ungracious as she was, she was really fond of him.

"I am afraid you will repent of this blind infatuation, my dear boy; you will find out your mistake!"

"When I do, I will come and confess to you that I was mistaken, aunt."

The upshot of it all was that it was agreed that Cecil should bring Nell to afternoon tea in Rutland Gate on the eve of her return home. Cecil had hoped great things from this concession, but when the tea party was over, he could not honestly say that his expectations and hopes had been in any way realized.

The meeting had been full of constraint on both sides. Neither of the elder ladies were gifted with much of that gracious tact which helps out a difficult position. They were formally cold and studiously polite in their reception of her, and Nell, who had honestly desired, for Cecil's sake, to make herself winning and pleasant to them, was gradually thrown back upon herself and frozen into coldness and nervous shyness.

The conversation by degrees became more and more laboured and difficult, and merged itself at last into a sort of subdued antagonism. Once or twice, scarcely veiled little sneers and slighting remarks concerning her belongings, made Nell's temper rise and the angry colour flash into her face, while Cecil sat by feeling exceedingly uncomfortable. For instance, when she spoke of her grandmother's advancing age and failing eyesight, Mrs. Torrens pursed up her lips into a disdainful silence, whilst Mrs. Roscoe suggested the consolations of religion as a fitting antidote for a worldly and ill-spent life. When again she happened to mention her father, Mrs. Roscoe immediately inquired after her uncle Robert, whom Nell had never seen. "He and my father are not very good friends," she explained a little hesitatingly.

"Ah! I am not surprised to hear that," Mrs. Roscoe had

replied significantly. "Your uncle Robert was not in the least like your father, and he was most fortunate in his wife; he married a good woman and a thoroughbred lady." The subject was an awkward one, and Cecil changed it hastily by asking Nell if she had had any news of her sisters, and then poor Nell, all unconsciously, put the finishing stroke to her misdemeanours by her perfectly innocent and unconscious reply:

"Yes, I had a letter from Dottie last night. She was in high spirits. They had all been over in a wagonette to the Fenchester races, and only fancy, Dottie backed Hereward to win, and Jolly-boy for a place! Can you imagine such luck! But she is always so lucky! it is quite wonderful. But, of course, she only put ten shillings on each, and got a very short price, as they made Hereward a hot favourite at the last. Still she won three pounds ten altogether." Then Nell began to be aware that Cecil was frowning at her vigorously, her voice faltered, and the confidences concerning her sister's winnings died away into a confused silence.

"Ahem! Do you mean to say that your sisters go to races?" inquired Mrs. Torrens with a chilly severity, looking at her across the tea table.

"Always, when they can get a chance of going," replied the girl a little defiantly.

"And when they go *they bet*, I understand?"

"Certainly! it isn't much fun going to races unless you do!" And Nell's heart thumped hotly and almost audibly, and there was a glitter that was not of peace in her beautiful eyes. Secretly she herself often deplored Dottie's betting habits, but now she would have stood by her to the death.

"And you? I suppose you also join in this ladylike and honourable amusement?" inquired Mrs. Torrens with withering scorn.

"No, no!" cried Cecil, rushing to the rescue. "Nell never bets or goes to races, do you, Nell? I don't believe you have ever been to a race in your life, have you? But we will go to Ascot some day, Nell, when we are married."

He took her hand a prisoner and clenched it hard within his own, to give her courage, and Nell, for his sake, curbed her temper and answered him with a smile:

"No, Cecil, that is quite true. I have never been to a race-

course, but that is because I don't really care to go, it would not amuse me. I shall like, however, to go to Ascot with you."

"It is to be hoped that you do not go because you do not approve of such places, my dear, and I do not think Cecil would be at all wise in taking you to races," said Mrs. Roscoe severely, "although with her husband a lady may certainly go anywhere—that is a very different thing." And Nell was discreet, and held her tongue.

No, it had not been a success—not in the least! As they walked away together from the house in Rutland Gate, when it was over, Cecil was in the very lowest depths of depression. For some moments neither of them spoke. Their way lay across Hyde Park, and the silence of a misty November evening enveloped them on every side as they emerged from the noisy streets into the Park. It was not till then that either of them said a word. All at once, under cover of the darkness, Nell slipped her hand shyly into her lover's.

"Dear Cecil," she murmured. "I am so sorry!"

She had never been so near to loving him as at this moment. She seemed to realize that he was suffering, and for her sake, and that he had sympathized with her, and the perception of this brought her very near to him.

"Never mind, I don't feel it very badly," she continued consolingly.

"Oh, Nell, how good you are!" he answered brokenly. "I wanted it to turn out so well, and it has all been such a miserable failure."

"Never mind," said Nell once more; "it doesn't hurt me."

"You won't give me up, will you, Nell?"

"Oh, no. Why should I? After all, it concerns no one else, only ourselves," she added softly.

For a moment his good angel tempted him to say to her: "Then let us set every one else at defiance and be married at once;" but more prudent thoughts flocked upon him before he had found courage to say the words. If he was in love, he was also very cautious—the love was an extraneous affair, but the caution was ingrain. After all, he knew very little about her, and he had promised his mother to wait.

Her thoughts must have followed his very closely, for in the next moment she gave him an opening.

"Easter is a long way off, Cecil ; and you and I are never likely to care for each other more than we do at present."

For half a moment he was silent. If only he had been brave and trustful ; if only there had not been so many other influences warring within him against those rare impulses that should have taught him instinctively to believe in her. And then there was his mother. A good man—and Cecil was essentially good, despite the faults of his character—does not easily turn round on his mother ! Mrs. Roscoe has not figured in these pages in any very amiable light, but although it saddened him unspeakably that she should have gone against him in this, the most momentous question of his life, Cecil could not, for all that, forget the long years of affection that had preceded these last few stormy weeks—the tender love that had watched over him from infancy, the untiring patience, the self-sacrifice, the long days and nights when he had been ill, when she had watched by his sick bed and nursed him hand and foot with unflinching devotion. Can a good son forget all this, utterly and wholly ; even for the sake of the woman whom he hopes to make his wife ? Cecil at any rate was not one of those who could do so. He said to himself that his mother must come first, let who will be second.

"Easter does seem a long way off, dearest," he answered at last, and his answer was given with a sigh ; "but time passes very quickly, and much as I should have liked to be married at an earlier date, I cannot but bow to my mother's wishes ; one never does any harm by waiting a little, and perhaps you and she will learn to know one another better by that time ; I earnestly hope so."

"I would not reckon overmuch upon that hope, my dear boy," replied Nell with a little laugh, which in spite of her utmost efforts, was a trifle hard and scornful.

And then for some moments they walked on together in absolute silence.

There is not the woman born who does not resent coldness and calculation in her lover. If for one moment it is she who has made the advance, and he who has drawn back, then not all her affection for him will serve to wash out the humiliation of that position with regard to him. Nell, who was proud, and whose love was not strong enough to enable her to overcome her pride, felt the sting of the repulse bitterly and deeply.

For it is against nature and the rightful order of things that the man should be the one to draw back. It is from the woman's side that doubts and misgivings should arise ; from her that objections and delays ought to suggest themselves, and if Nell in a generous impulse of the moment, moved by no selfish passion, by no personal inclination, but simply by a desire to make things easier and better for them both, if she had for an instant reversed that natural *rôle* betwixt man and woman, was it not for him to have met her more than half way with grateful joy, and with an eager acceptance of her suggestion ?

But he had not done so. He had only talked calmly and deliberately about the advantages of delay, and the superior claims of his mother's wishes. A barrier, mountains high and hopelessly impassable, seemed to rise up all at once between them. The little *rapprochement* of heart that had drawn her so closely to him but a few moments ago vanished again into thin air ; they were wide as the poles asunder now. Even Cecil felt it vaguely and intangibly, with an uneasy sense in his mind that he had somehow put himself in the wrong with her.

"Why are women so unreasonable !" he said to himself almost with anger.

By this time they had reached the wide open space in the centre of Hyde Park. It was quite dark ; only far away to the north and to the east, the long lines of sickly gas lamps flickered palely yellow, through the faint mist which filled the air. There was no sky above, only a brown and murky atmosphere, whilst the outlines of the leafless trees pencilled themselves in inky blackness against the gloom. The muffled hum of the busy city beyond scarce broke the stillness with its distant murmur, only now and again the footstep of a pedestrian hurrying past them or coming rapidly nearer along the path, echoed ringingly with a weird distinctness through the silence of the November evening. It was a darkness that was not altogether dark, but was rather that semi-gloom that is neither night nor day, but to which the eye by degrees grows accustomed, and through which, after a time, it becomes possible to distinguish one object from another.

All at once Cecil spoke.

"Nell," he said, turning rather suddenly round to her and peering through the dusk into her face, "I wish you would set my mind at rest about something."

"What is it, Cecil?"

"You must not be angry with me, but there is something that haunts me—about you."

"About me!" she repeated wonderingly.

"Of course I know it can be nothing at all, dear; nothing but idle gossip—how could it be? I am so certain of that, so certain of you altogether, that I could stake my existence upon it. But, I suppose I am nervous and upset to-night, and if I could hear you say just once, that there was nothing in it, I think I should be happier."

"Suppose you tell me what it is you are alluding to," said Nell, a little hardly and coldly. "I am not a magician, and I cannot possibly guess what you mean. What is this gossip, pray?"

"Ah, that is just what I cannot tell you!" replied the young man with a little uneasy laugh; "and what is more, the man who spoke of it did not tell me either. Oh Nell! you must take me for a lunatic, to be so stupidly vague!"

"You are certainly somewhat incoherent," assented the girl drily, looking straight in front of her.

"It was only—" he went on lamely and awkwardly, after a moment's pause, during which he hoped in vain that she would question him and so make it easier for him, but she said nothing, so he was forced to flounder on unaided—"only a man I met one day at a club dinner, who was speaking of your grandmother. He said something about one of her granddaughters having got into some scrape, or adventure or other, with some man. But, of course, Nell, it could not be you, could it? Those sisters of yours are rather fast and flirty, as we both know, and I daresay it was one of them; I don't want in the least to pry into your sisters' private histories; it would not be my business at all; but if you could just tell me, Nell——"

"What am I to tell you? about Dottie and Millie's love affairs, do you mean?" her voice was singularly dull and lifeless.

"Oh no, no, Nell! why do you misunderstand me so? as if I cared about Dottie and Millie! they might have forty thousand lovers, it wouldn't signify a brass farthing to me. It is *you* that I care about—you that are so different to them—so sweet, so good, so true;" and then he came to a dead stop, and there was a silence.

"Well?" said Nell, presently, still in the same dull and uninterested voice. "We don't seem getting any nearer to it, do we? If you will tell me exactly what you wish me to say——"

"Oh, Nell, you are very hard to me; why can't you say it of your own accord? why can't you just say, 'Cecil, I swear to you that I never did a single thing in all my life that was wrong or sinful?' that is all I want."

"That would be rather a large order, wouldn't it?" she said with a little mirthless laugh, "seeing that we all confess ourselves to be miserable sinners every Sunday of our lives!"

"You know that is not what I mean in the very least! you are angry with me for my baseless suspicions, and you are just playing with me and trying to torture me. For God's sake be just to me; remember how many people there are who are ready to say horrid things just now, and who would be glad enough to put false impressions in my heart about you; but I believe in you, Nell, upon my soul, I do; only be good to me and say to me just once with your own lips: 'Cecil, there is nothing in my past life to be ashamed of, or that can ever be brought up against me, to bring the faintest shadow of disgrace upon my husband's name.' Say that to me of yourself, and as there is a God above us I will banish all these cruel doubts from my mind for ever."

For a few seconds again there was silence, and many things rushed through Nell's heart in a passionate tumult.

She would tell him nothing—nothing! he did not deserve her confidence; moreover the story was so long—and so ugly—so impossible to explain, he would never understand, he who was conventional and strait-laced in his ideas! Besides she had done no wrong; she might have been foolish but she had not been sinful—not even in thought—she had saved herself from the danger, and nobody had ever known of it. Ah! in the name of fortune how had this rumour got about? Had not her grandmother assured her that nobody would ever hear of it—that the grave would soon close over herself, the only one who knew the story—that to speak of it to Cecil would be foolishness, for that Vane Darley had disappeared and would never cross her path any more?

Why should she give herself away, then? and to this man of

all others, who would be so hard and so merciless to her childish fault?

And it had not been a sin, she could answer him in that, honestly and truthfully enough, if indeed it were worth her while to answer him at all.

And for one wild moment it came into her heart to rid herself of him for ever. He was suspicious and cautious; he was cold and he was strait-laced—she hated all these things, and she did not love him! Why should she not dismiss him at once and for ever from her life? Why not say to him now, at once and plainly:

"I have nothing to tell you, but you can go out of my existence and out of my heart. I do not love you enough to forgive you your cruel suspicions."

But before she had spoken the words, she thought about her father and her sisters. What a horrible and unspeakable disappointment it would be to them all, were she to break off her engagement. How stupid, too, to give up her one chance of a better life—how great a mistake to throw away this rare opportunity of making a marriage that would be of the utmost benefit and advantage to them all; and more than all else, were she to answer his question in such a fashion, would it not be giving to him a tacit admission of the things he had brought up against her? This last consideration turned the scale. She could not confide wholly in him; she did not dare to leave him with that unanswered question on his lips.

So, like many another woman before her, Nell Forrester took the middle way of reticence and discretion; of half truth, that is not truth at all. Yet she told him no lie; she perjured her soul by no false oath; she adhered strictly at least to the letter, if not to the spirit of the truth.

"My dear Cecil," she said to him quietly, "you are exciting yourself very foolishly, still I am quite ready to swear to you that there is nothing I have ever done in all my life that can bring disgrace upon you, or shame upon myself. Will that content you?"

He seized her hand and pressed it gratefully between his own.

"My dearest Nell, I knew it, I knew it!" he cried gladly and earnestly. "God bless you for those words. Now nothing, not even the shadow of evil, can ever come between us again."

And as he spoke the words, the tall figure of a man passed close to them in the darkness. He half turned as he went by, and the dull light of the murky sky struck for a second upon his pale face and wasted frame.

Nell saw him perfectly.

It was Vane Darley.

(To be continued.)

Mashonaland.

A SETTLER'S VIEW OF THE SITUATION.

By G. GORDON SAMSON.

MASHONALAND! Every one was talking about it at the Cape when I left in the middle of October. It was "Mashonaland" if you met a man in the street; it was "Lobengula" if you went into a restaurant; "the Matabele" in church; the "Mashona" in the markets; "the Chartered Company" (which, translated into English, reads, "The Chartered British South Africa Company") in Capetown; "the Bechuanaland police" at Port Elizabeth; and Mr. Cecil Rhodes everywhere. Besides these general headings for referring to the main topic, there were many others of less frequent recurrence, such as Sir Henry Loch, the volunteers (to say nothing of the recruiting sergeant), Khama, the rains, the bad roads, Martini-Henri rifles, obstructed telegraphic communication, and a host of other minor details.

For the moment Cape Colony has been entirely swallowed up by the British South Africa Company, and Mashonaland alone remains on the board to attract the attention of the world. Natal is forgotten; the German territories have disappeared; the Portuguese lands seem, for the nonce, never to have existed; only Mashonaland remains. And now the clever cook is placing Matabeleland on the dish as well, lest the mind should become surfeited with too much of a good thing.

The strange part about Mashonaland is that you will never find any two people who exactly agree on the causes of the present troubles; what led up to them, and what should be, or should have been done, to alleviate them. Both in England and at the Cape each person holds some view of the matter peculiar to himself. He goes about telling every one he meets all about this peculiar view, and he listens to all about every one else's peculiar views, and wonders why no one else holds his peculiar view, since it is the right one. But he does not quarrel about it;

he merely sticks to his own idea. I never met a man who quarrelled about Mashonaland: they all discuss it. I am the only man I ever met that did not hold any views whatever about Mashonaland, or the "Question," or the "Situation;" and I think it was a mistake not to do so, because for a little while I got confused among the multiplicity and peculiarities of every one else's views; but I wanted to keep my mind open. I have kept it open to the last, even after returning to England and hearing Mr. Labouchere, the apostle of the Matabele, recount, in vivid oration, the woes of Lobengula, that most innocent and truthful of all guileless savages; the oppression and cruelty of the Chartered Company; its high-handed arrogance in refusing to deliver up Mashona to be executed by the above guileless barbarian; the wickedness of its evil promoters; its nearness to bankruptcy; and a thousand other convincing details.

I had heard the "views" of men who had been in the pioneer expedition to Mashonaland and of those who knew nothing about the country. I had talked with the directors of gold mining companies (or of companies reputed by some to possess mines or claims in Mashonaland), with merchants, with hunters, with fat Dutchmen and "canny Scots;" in fact, with everybody that I came across I had conversed on this universal topic—Mashonaland. Then I went on board a steamer at Port Elizabeth and told myself that I would say good-bye to Mashonaland and the stories of the fever, and the lions, and the gold, until I reached England. But it was not to be. Exactly opposite to me at table sat a man who was just down from Mashonaland, having come by way of Delagoa Bay, and was going to Cape Town. He had been in the country since it was first opened up, and knew what a newspaper reporter would describe as "every inch of it" (there are only a few billions of individual inches in every square mile).

Of course there was no help for it, so I attacked the man at once about Mashonaland (well knowing that if I did not attack him he assuredly would attack me), and posed as a person whose acquaintance with Mashonaland and its affairs was limited to not more than half-an-hour's perusal of some of the current literature on the subject. And this is how I opened the campaign, and what he told me:

"What do you think will be the end of the present trouble?"

I said—I felt that there was no need to say what trouble I meant.

"Difficult to say," he answered. "The Chartered Company are drafting men into the country, but it is getting so late now that nothing more is likely to be done till the next dry season. The rains generally commence in November and last till March, and little or nothing can be done while they are on. In the end I should not wonder if the whites wipe out the Matabele."

"What do you think of Lobengula?" I inquired.

"Ah! Lo Ben. will give them trouble," answered the settler. "Lo Ben. is a very long-headed fellow, and it will take Cecil Rhodes all his time to manage him. Mr. Rhodes thinks that he can do what he likes with him; but this is not the case. I tell you," he continued, "that the whole matter is very difficult and complicated. Lo Ben. is, from his point of view, perfectly in the right. He punished the Mashonas, for some offence, by sending an impi, which attacked them and killed a large number, burning their kraals, and otherwise devastating the country in the neighbourhood of Victoria. He looks upon the Mashonas as his slaves, and if they fail to obey his orders he thinks he may do as he likes with them. But civilization takes a different view of the matter.

"The history of the present troubles, and what led up to them, is very simple. Before the Chartered Company was formed, envoys, exploiters—call them what you like—were sent into the country to arrange terms with Lobengula. He granted the concession of the mining rights of the country to the new company, while reserving to himself his old rights of governing his subjects, and levying taxes on them as he had done before. Now the Mashonas were all his property—slaves taken in war—and it was their duty to do all the agricultural work, rear the cattle, and so on. If they failed to do this he punished them in his own way.

"A great number of Mashonas live on the borders of Matabeleland, on Matabele farms, rearing the cattle, and doing all the agricultural and manual work—the Matabele themselves being just a nation of fighting men. The Mashonas who live in Mashonaland proper are expected to pay tribute. When, however, they found that the English had taken up a strong position

in their country, they shook off the yoke of the Matabele, and determined to obey them no longer. The Matabele, on the other hand, made up their minds to force them into obedience; thence the present troubles. This is the whole story in a nutshell."

"There is no fight in a Mashona, is there?" I inquired.

"No," he said, "the Matabele have taken all the spirit out of them. But they will fight amongst themselves, especially if there are a few whites around to back them up. Gad! sir, they will fight then!"

"The Matabele, however, are a thoroughly warlike race. They have great military kraals, just like so many barracks, established throughout the country, where the fighting men live in a state of constant discipline. Each of these kraals will contain about a thousand men, and they are thoroughly drilled and well equipped."

"But where do they get their weapons from?"

"The Chartered Company made them a present of a thousand Martini-Henri rifles."

"A thousand Martini-Henri rifles!" I exclaimed in utter astonishment. "What on earth did they do that for?"

"For a bribe," said my companion, amused at my surprise. "Besides the Martini-Henri they have all sorts and descriptions of rifles; the Winchester repeating, the Snider, and every other description of weapon imaginable. In fact, if you meet a hundred Matabele, you will most likely find ten different sorts of rifles amongst them. You see, the traders have been up there for the last fifty years. They have lots of ammunition too, and I tell you they are careful of it. Why, man, a Matabele would not fire a shot unnecessarily for five shillings."

I asked him if he considered the Matabele an aggressive race.

"No," he said. "I have travelled all amongst them, and I never found them so. In fact, I never heard of a Matabele touching a white man, or harming him in any way. They only attack the Mashona, whom, as I said before, they consider their slaves."

"The Matabele is generally a great powerful fellow, as large and as strong as a Zulu. He is very proud and easily takes offence, so that you have to be very careful in dealing with him, for if you offend him he is quick to show his resentment, and is

not in the least afraid of you, either. But in travelling in Matabeleland I have always found that the natives would give you everything you wanted, if you went the right way to work with them."

"There seems, from all I can gather," I said, "to be a strange system of land tenure up there. One cannot buy a piece of land right out unless one lives on it either personally or by agent for a certain number of years, I understand."

"Yes, that is so. As a matter of fact, the Chartered Company hardly possesses the right of granting land, you see. When they obtained their concessions from Lobengula they bargained for the mining rights, which were to be granted to them on condition that they paid £100 a month to Lo Ben. An Irish lawyer, one of the ablest men out here, was sent up to draw out the deeds and get them signed. Lo Ben. of course had an interpreter, and in due course signed the deeds—in whatever way he may have done that. But he was vastly surprised when he found that the Chartered Company had established themselves in Mashonaland with a force of five hundred police, and thoroughly taken possession of the country.

"Undoubtedly in the end there will be fighting—probably in the next dry season. In the meantime Lo Ben. will carry on negotiations with the Government at home; and I think myself that in the end he will consent to come under Imperial protection."

"And now tell me about the natural features of the country," I said, as we lighted another cigarette. "I suppose it is very tropical as regards its vegetation; there are doubtless many palms, orchids, bananas and such things, are there not?"

"No," he said, "there is nothing tropical at all about the country in the way you mean. No palms, or canes, or bamboos, or anything of that sort. It is a very barren-looking country—much the same as it is down here. Of course it is intensely hot, but the country is mostly barren. There are large tracts just covered with long grass, and, again, others with short brushwood, and there are huge swamps. The mountains are of granite, but in the rainy season—for it seems to be raining all the time up there for several months out of the year—they too are covered with all sorts of vegetation. The bush is just ordinary open bush, growing about twenty or thirty feet high, and has

not any of the tropical features about it that you mentioned just now."

"There is a lot of game of all sorts up there, is there not?" I inquired.

"Yes, there are plenty of animals; but you have to look for them. When you get up to the Zambesi, and all over the plain to the north of it, you find yourself amongst all sorts of game. That is the place for animals and no mistake. But there are great mosquitos up there which bite terrifically. Why, man, you sometimes meet with mosquitos almost as big as this cigarette"—and he held out the half-smoked weed.

"Ah," I said—we were both laughing by this time—"you may make me believe a good deal, but that is a little too tall!"

"No, but truly, I have sometimes seen them nearly as long as a blue-bottle fly, though of course not so stout. They don't attack those who have been in the country some time, like myself, but they fasten on to the new-comers. I was travelling with a young fellow up there some time ago, and one night they bit him tremendously, giving him no peace at all. In the morning he showed the bites to me. 'Well,' he said, 'I suppose I will have to be bathing these wounds.' 'What, Pat,' I exclaimed, 'these are never mosquito bites? Why, man, a mosquito could not bite like that!' 'Bite, man,' he replied; 'they bite like lions.'"

Of course every one who has been in Mashonaland has come across lions, for the whole country teems with them. My companion told me that just before he left Victoria a lion had been shot within fifty yards of the town.

"They will not touch you if you are alone," he said, "but if you have anything with you—horses or mules or oxen—they will set on you at once.

"The first time that I met a lion that was at all inclined to attack me was one morning when I was walking along in the cold grey twilight, before sunrise.

"I was going on ahead, and the wagon was following me at a short distance. I noticed the foot-prints of a lion in the long grass, but did not take much heed of them, believing them to be those of a very large dog belonging to a party that had gone on some way ahead of us.

"Suddenly I heard a terrific growling coming from somewhere in the long grass not far from where I was. I stopped and looked all around me to see if I could discover any traces of the animal—for the echo makes it impossible for you to locate the sound at all—and I spotted a tuft of long grass, about thirty yards behind me, where I thought the lion must be. Presently a lioness rose from here, and came with great bounds right past where I was standing, and then stopped about thirty yards from me. I turned round and confronted her, and we stood looking each other full in the face. I had my rifle all ready, and took aim, and waited, wondering if I could hit her. I knew I had my one chance, and after that it was her turn, for if you fail to kill a lion, though you may put ten shots into it and mortally wound it, Gad, sir! it will come up and kill you.

"I made up my mind that my best plan was to wait till the wagon came up, so as soon as it was near enough I halloed out to the natives that there was a lioness in front; and when they came up I got into the wagon, and we all fired from there; but the shots missed and the lioness cleared away."

"What do you think of the climate of Mashonaland?" I said. "Some people have told me it was very fine."

"Really," he answered, "it is sinful to think of the lies that are told about the climate of Mashonaland, and the country itself, in order to induce people to go up there. It is a miserable climate, and the fever is terrible. I have seen fifty per cent. of the people at Victoria carried off by it last year. It is not a thing that injures you permanently if you get it, but it is very liable to carry you off. Strength and a good constitution do not protect you, for the strongest man may be laid quite low with it in twenty-four hours. Your hands become almost transparent; you can count every bone in them. I have had it myself for three months; but when I once got over it I got quite strong again in a fortnight. You eat ravenously when you get rid of it, and I have put on as much as two pounds in weight a day when I was recovering. To have had it once is no protection against having it again. Whenever it comes round it is sure to give you a call. I had an attack of it in Delagoa Bay, coming down from Mashonaland this time, but I had a good doctor, and I have got rid of it now."

"What class of people does the population of Mashonaland

consist of?" I inquired. "Are they mostly employed by the mining companies?"

"I can soon tell you what class of people they are up there," he answered. "In the first place, almost every one is connected, more or less, with the Chartered Company. This company itself employs a good many people in one way and another—chiefly in the Mashonaland police. Then all the other companies—the mining and prospecting concerns—which employ the rest of the people, are dependent upon the Chartered Company; so that you may say that the Chartered Company has almost every one in the country more or less at its beck and call. Many old Cape Colonists went up to Mashonaland when it was first opened up, but finding what the life and prospects were, they soon came down again. Now almost all the people are young fellows newly out from England, who know what the life there is, and perhaps have friends who have come out here and are doing well. Thus the population of Mashonaland is a very raw one.

"They live very wildly up there, you know. Every one gets mad with the gold fever; and the gold fever is a very thirsty thing. You may talk of drink, but, man, I never saw anything like what it is up there! The people literally go mad.

"Living, too, is very expensive. The cheapest article costs a shilling, and that is a packet of cigarettes. Drinks are a shilling and eighteen pence each—sometimes three shillings when they are scarce. Everything else is in proportion, so that although pay is high, there is little margin, and the people don't make enough to carry them out of the country. Besides, being, as I said, a raw set, unused to life at the Cape, they would have difficulty in getting work if they did leave Mashonaland and go into one of the other states.

"Quite recently I was employed by one of the gold mining companies near Victoria to oversee the men. They were a capital set of fellows, and I never had any fault to find with the way they behaved themselves or did their work. Suddenly the news of the Matabele trouble arrived, and in three days every man at the mine had become utterly demoralized; they one and all got drunk, and from being quiet, sensible human beings, they were suddenly transformed into lunatics.

"When I left Victoria, in the middle of September, no one was doing any work. Every one was waiting to see how the Matabele trouble would end."

"The newspapers would lead us to believe that almost every one in Mashonaland is under arms," I said.

"Yes," he replied, "that is quite right. I was under arms myself for a fortnight before I left Victoria."

"Well, I was telling you of the way in which some of these fellows go on. I used to know two of the wildest of them, named MacMac and Spink. MacMac lived in a hut near mine, and one day he got the fever. I went in to see him, and found him swearing the most awful oaths—terrible oaths, man, in a regular string, one after the other, just for amusement."

"Presently a minister of religion came in, and heard MacMac swearing away in this style. Then he began to talk to him of fever and death and such things, and told him that if he went on swearing in that way he would go to hell most assuredly. MacMac listened to him for a little while without seeming to pay any attention. Then suddenly laying hold of a boot: 'There will be two of us going there shortly, unless you clear, I am thinking,' he exclaimed."

"The minister did clear."

"This MacMac was a great athlete and acrobat, I should have told you, and a good while before this, when the whites had come to a conference with Lobengula, he came up amongst the rest."

"The Matabele chief sat in state, surrounded by his attendants, and the whites came up to do homage to him."

"When MacMac's turn arrived, he came running up, and turning a great somersault, arrived in the middle of the circle."

"'How do you like that, old fellow?' he said, but of course the mighty Lo Ben. did not understand a word of what he was talking about. Then he turned a somersault to the right and afterwards another to the left, and then turning towards his white friends: 'I think the old beggar likes it,' he said."

"After the performance was over Lo Ben. declared that this man must be a chief amongst the whites, because he could use not only his limbs, but his tongue."

Then I turned the conversation in the direction of the gold resources of the country.

"Yes," he said, "there is gold in the country—I think there is a lot of gold in it; but the man who will find it is the tanned and weather-beaten prospector, the man who has been at the business all his life; for it takes a great deal of experience to make a successful prospector, mind you, and the raw emigrants who have just come into the country are no good at all for this kind of work. On the other hand, the old prospector goes into the country with the assurance that if there is gold there, he will find it."

To V—— b——

I.

As thy name, Violet, so thine eyes
Before the long dark lashes sweep,
Like sudden cloud o'er summer skies,
Across their meaning surface-deep.

II.

Yet, have I learnt it? In that book
I skimmed through in an idle hour
Mayhap my sullen whim mistook
The tenderness for devil power?

III.

God grant that I have been deceived!
God give the love my hope denied!
Or in the night that she conceived
Who bare me, would the world had died!

IV.

I loved you. Now I read your eyes
And find a hidden meaning there.
I love you. Ere the love-light dies
Kiss me, and listen to my prayer.

J. R. L. R.

Judge Not.

IN TWO PARTS.

By MRS. BOYSE,

Author of "THAT MOST DISTRESSFUL COUNTRY," etc.

PART II.

ONCE more in the country the roses blossomed, refreshed by soft airs and balmy dews.

And in the city their tender petals were ruthlessly pierced with sharp wires lest they should fall prematurely before they had ministered to the caprices of the public, which is not prone to undue softness towards flowers or fellow-creatures.

Lilian Pomeroy, like the roses, had lived in the sweet country sunshine a free, innocent, careless life; her greatest triumph to pose as the queen of a rustic merry-making, her throne of fragrant hay, her sceptre and crown of fresh roses.

Dolores, the dancer, had become the talk of London from her beauty, grace and untiring energy.

Her picture was in every shop and newspaper; she was the idol of the hour: who cared how miserable she might be as long as she could amuse the world?

Her natural dramatic instinct had rendered her invaluable to her employers; for not only could she dance to perfection, but improvised new dances, which others vainly strove to copy.

Nightly she exhibited herself to the public gaze, and the excitement of her success braced her as the wires do the rose leaves, though for all that the girlish heart ached bitterly sometimes, when she thought of the old perfect love and happiness of the lovely Devonshire home life, and of the gentle mother who lived on happy in her delusion, and would have died rather than live on her daughter's earnings had she known. But it was so easy to deceive her! She and Jael believed their darling safe and sheltered; not, of course, in her aunt's home, but with a yet kinder friend.

Nightly as these fond ignorant women prayed for their child and slept peacefully afterwards, she was baring her fair neck and

arms, and performing feats of skill and strength, to dazzle and attract the eyes of men. And between the scenes and afterwards she was hardened now to the bold words and glances which had made her shrink and tremble at first like a scared bird.

So far, however, she was pure as when she lisped her prayers at her mother's knee in childhood. Of course, no one believed it; men repulsed sharply, went off and whispered away her good name at their clubs.

Women still received in society, though their intrigues were shameless and open, lamented the male depravity in admiring such an immodest creature. They saw no beauty in her.

Lady Delamode, shaking the luxuriant hair just come from Bond Street, marvelled why Dolores should wear such an obvious wig. Quite absurdly overdone, don't you know!

And Mrs. Passay, carefully seated in a shaded corner, and happy in the (mistaken) belief that her last discovery in flesh tints was undetectable, assured her audience that Dolores was enamelled not only all over her face, neck and arms, but actually to the knee. Yes, it was quite true; done on purpose for special parts.

They could not even give such a lost soul credit for possessing a fair skin and abundant hair, much less morals.

Dolores neither knew nor cared what was said.

Her one intensely strong feeling was for her mother; it took the place of the religion which had died in her heart when those who professed it would give her no help in her hour of need. Her lover had proved unfaithful, and she believed no more in love.

Kit, the girl who had helped her without thought of return, was left far behind in the lower ranks of the profession, never likely to rise, but to her Dolores was always a faithful friend; and the cripple, Betty, whose temper was soured by much pain, adored her with a strange, passionate, dog-like fidelity.

The sisters' little room was full of nice things now. Betty had flowers, a comfortable chair and a good supply of fruit and other delicacies; but most of all she prized the company of the girl who was her idea of perfection, and Dolores spent many an afternoon with her when Kit was off for one of the cheap outings

with her Bill, which were their greatest bliss ; noisy, jolly, vulgar excursions enough, but enjoyed as Dolores longed to enjoy anything again. She went to many entertainments, often given specially for her ; river picnics, coaching parties, suppers, and all seemed flat, stale and boring.

A new piece was to be produced, and in this Dolores felt some interest.

Its author adored her, a young clever man, unable for lack of interest and money to push himself, till chance threw him in Dolores' way ; and carried away by passion, he wrote a dainty poetic sketch, full of tender music, with a wonderfully catching lilt in it. Dolores, his inspiration, was of course heroine, a fairy princess, who left her elfland kingdom for love of a mortal ; and at this point Dolores, being consulted, suggested the idea of the end : the fairy, becoming a ballet girl, should be deserted by her lover, and in the last scene die in the snow, dancing, for the last time, to the sound of his wedding music. The whole was a daring mixture of romance and pathos ; sweet, sad, pathetic airs and words, sharply and racily contrasted by slangy, ringing, popular ditties.

A very experimental piece ; the cautious manager had his doubts about it, but Dolores threw herself into it heart and soul. She could give the author no love, but she might give him success—and she liked him.

The curtain rose on Fairyland, an exquisitely designed scene, with graceful dances and revels of well-trained fairies—ethereal beings whose gambols were disturbed by the arrival of a mortal of the most modern type, who presently began to teach them breakdowns and street songs.

Clever, certainly : smart dialogue, tuneful music ; but it failed to "catch on ;" the night was sultry, the audience languid.

The man who wrote it wiped his white face and felt sick and nervous. The man who had speculated in it grew worried and savage. Dolores was five minutes late. It dragged visibly—there was a faint hiss ; the manager cursed, not loudly, but with a will, and just then Dolores slipped by him, and giving him a saucy nod as she passed, floated slowly forward to the music of a soft, dreamy, languorous strain, seemingly supported by her cloudy opaline glistening draperies, which she wound and unwound like wreaths of mist about her lovely face and form. Sweeter and

more plaintive grew the music, and Dolores, pausing, sang a kind of simple short ballad to its accompaniment.

Her voice, though not very strong, was sweet and true; the rhyming words, if of little poetical merit, were tastefully set, and the singer gave expression to them as she described how love, being unknown in elfland, one thing was lacking to make it perfect.

A glass was steadily fixed on her as she sang by a man in the balcony, with sandy hair and beard, who resembled a German professor, and when he lowered it he rubbed his hands triumphantly.

The soft strains died away lingeringly, the singer retreating as she sang till the last notes were heard from behind a group of tropical flowers. Then suddenly the orchestra, with a crash of the instruments, burst into a mad ringing melody which thrilled every pulse, set heads moving and feet quivering to its tantalizing fascinating strain; and Dolores flashed out once more, freed from the cloudy draperies which she had used so effectively, and glistening in a jewelled dress. Coloured lights falling on her as she skimmed, circled and bounded in her rapid bewildering dance, she appeared now as if clad in rubies, which turned again to sapphires or emeralds; and moved to thorough enthusiasm, the audience applauded her with such warmth and eagerness as had rarely been surpassed, or even equalled, since the theatre was built.

From the occupants of the royal box to the costers in the back of the gallery, every one united to applaud her, and Dolores was for once moved to triumphant satisfaction at her own success, as behind the scenes the author, beside himself with rapture, kissed her hand kneeling, and the manager spoke with a warmth hitherto unknown.

There was no fear of failure now. Roused and sympathetic, the audience followed each scene and noted every point, laughing at the comic parts, the smart allusions, songs and repartees: interested as the plot developed, and the lover grew faithless to his fairy princess for the sake of a charmer of the *mondaine* order, likewise a dancer.

Poetry and prose, romance and its opposite, were cleverly contrasted in the dainty gracious fairy and her slangy, devil-may-care, reckless rival.

The scenes "In Stageland" were original, and took the public fancy.

Dolores had never before played a part which brought out more than her powers of dancing. In this quaint sketch she showed herself capable of passion and pathos, as she saw her lover being gradually stolen from her, and with him the hopes of heaven, only accessible to fairies through a mortal's love—a fanciful idea, which many in the audience appreciated.

The last act showed a gorgeous wedding entertainment. The rival was a bride; and then changing to the outside of the house, to the sound of the gay music within, Dolores appeared, and sang, to a waltz tune, a sad, haunting strain:

Heaven's gates are closed to me
Since my love proved untrue,
Earth's joys are dead to me
Since my love ceased to woo.

Yet in my dreams I still
Fancy him once more true,
Feel his lips pressed to mine,
As when he used to woo.

Prayer from my lips is vain,
Or with my latest breath
For my false love I'd plead,
True unto him till death.

And as once more a wildly brilliant melody rang out, and the gay couples could be seen whirling to its spirited notes, Dolores, with one sad, wailing, heartrending cry, sank down into the snow, and for a minute or two the fast-falling flakes fell on her; then the curtain suddenly and unexpectedly dropped.

There was a pause, and immediately after, rounds of vociferous applause fell with welcome sound on the ears of all concerned in the piece.

It had thoroughly taken the public fancy, and was well launched.

In the dress circle a man had entered late, and showed little interest in the acting till the light fell on Dolores in her last pathetic farewell.

Then leaning forward with a start he gazed eagerly, and turning to a stranger, said abruptly:

"Excuse me, who is that girl?"

"That one in front? oh, Dolores, the dancer. She is doing uncommonly well; no one knew she could act in this style: we're all accustomed to connect her with leg pieces—ballet, you know; but this is awfully good, isn't it?" returned the stranger pleasantly, mentally summing up his interrogator as "A fellow from abroad smitten all of a heap."

"I see she is called 'Dolores,' but I fancied you might know more about her. I am just come from India and quite out of the swim," said "the fellow" politely.

"I should be delighted to tell you if I did, but she's—well, just a dancer; no one thinks much of their real names. Some one told me she was a German Jewess, but I fancy she looks English. Quite the rage just now; lots of fellows swear she favours them: most of them are lying, I believe."

And with a civil salutation the men left the theatre and went their ways, and the one just from India found a telegram at his club to Captain Trevelyan, begging him to go on at once to Homburg, as his father was ill and could not return to town yet.

So he went next day and attended dutifully on the iron-grey man, who was out of health and unamiable; and still thinking of Dolores. Dick inquired of his mother if she knew where Lilian Pomeroy was.

"Lilian; oh, my dear, she was adopted by a rich aunt, and married—at least was engaged, and I think—I am sure—married a colonial bishop or something, in a very short time," said Lady Matilda, who was not specially accurate, and a great gossip.

"Who told you?" persisted Dick.

"Let me see—oh, I know; it was Miss Twoddley, and she knows the Sionleys very well, and they are very intimate with Mrs. Middington Stoney, and she was Squire Pomeroy's sister, not by the same mother, or stay—was it father?" And Lady Matilda prosed on to indifferent ears, for Dick felt convinced that it was but a chance resemblance that had startled him.

However, he asked Miss Twoddley, a toady of Lady Matilda's, who was also in Homburg, and she assured him that Lilian was married, solacing her conscience by the fact that the archdeacon certainly was (for he had speedily consoled himself), and Miss Twoddley really did not know who his wife was, but remembered that the Trevelyans objected to Lilian.

So Dick, after the masculine fashion, began to flirt with a smart American, whose father had made a colossal fortune in pork, and though he cared nothing for her, he took her fancy, and being a young lady of strong will she determined to marry the handsome young soldier, who had already achieved distinction.

Dolores had not been recognized with certainty by her lover, but Mr. Middington Stoney's eyes were sharp enough, for he it was who, disguised as a German professor, had been in the gallery on the opening night of the new piece.

Next day he called on her and, throwing off his ordinary hypocrisy, told her plainly that he must profit by his discovery.

"Pray may I ask how?" inquired Lilian drily.

Mr. Stoney looked at her and saw that he had made a false move. Lilian had been an inexperienced nervous girl; Dolores was a cold, determined woman.

"My lovely one," he said, endeavouring to slip an arm round her, "you were fond of me once; your aunt is excellent, certainly, but unsympathetic; let me find in you a kindred soul." Then as there was no response he fancied in his inordinate vanity that she was yielding, and painted seductive pictures of secret meetings, trips to Paris and other stolen pleasures.

Dolores turned on him with superb passion at last.

"Out of my sight, you infamous wretch. How dare you insult me thus?"

"Insult you," sneered Mr. Stoney; "such creatures as you can hardly be insulted. Dolores, the dancer! Dolores, the notorious——"

The coarse epithet remained unspoken, for beside herself with anger, Dolores snatched up a riding whip and struck him sharply across the mouth with it.

"If I were what you believe me, which I am not," she cried, "I should be degraded indeed to stoop to such as you, a cur who, under the garb of piety, is utterly vile; a contemptible coward who has not the courage to have even the one redeeming quality of frankness."

"I will have you up for assault," raved Mr. Stoney; "you shall be dragged through the police courts."

"Do so if you like," retorted Dolores, cooling down and speaking steadily; "your wife will be pleased to learn you go to

theatres, which she denounces as hell's antechambers, and that her niece is Dolores, the dancer."

The chance shot about the theatre told.

"You did not see me. No one will believe that I was at the theatre," said Mr. Stoney hastily. "In fact I was not there."

"Save yourself more lies," said his niece coldly, "and leave the room at once, or I shall ring for my landlord to turn you out; he is a strong man."

Mr. Stoney rose, but pausing, said maliciously:

"I shall go to your mother and talk with her about your sad and abandoned life."

A sudden pang seemed to contract Lilian's heart; she had not thought of this possibility.

"If you dare to molest her," she cried, "I will go at once to my aunt."

"She would not believe you," answered Mr. Stoney with a laugh; "such women as you are not credited."

"How much money will silence you?" exclaimed the girl passionately; "you hinted just now that you would share my earnings."

Mr. Stoney deliberated a moment. Revenge on this girl who had scorned him so cuttingly was sweet, but he wanted money badly to silence importunate creditors, and his wife had been less willing of late to provide him without awkward questions.

"It is more Christian to forgive," he said impressively, "and your money were better in my hands than squandered by you in wantonness of life. I will use it in furthering the cause of righteousness, and pray for your speedy conversion."

Surprised at his change of tone, Dolores, who had been unlocking a desk, turned sharply. A middle-aged man had entered quietly, carrying some lovely flowers: a very aristocratic, well-dressed personage, whose small keen eyes took the position in at a glance.

"What are you doing, my dear?" he said to Dolores. "Take my advice, don't give a halfpenny to further any cause; public charities are the cause of half the crime in the world."

"Sir, you are a blasphemer, an infidel, I fear," said Mr. Stoney. "Do you read your Bible?"

"I remember a text about a class who, for a pretence, made long prayers; they seem to have existed in all ages. Money

given to public charity is wasted in guzzling and drinking by a set of greedy committee men, who then pocket most of the residue, and the wretched people the money should have helped are left to starve, or insulted by miserable doles."

"This is not a public charity," said Dolores quietly. "I wish to save a poor blind widowed lady from suffering."

"Eh! a blind lady? What's the trouble, Dolores? Just let me hear the story," persisted the new-comer. "If she is poor, you take her the money yourself, my good child; never send it by a third person. If it's anything else, let me see to it; I shall not steal your notes nor blackmail the poor lady."

"Do you mean to insinuate that I should?" stammered Mr Stoney in a fury.

"I only said that I should not, sir," responded the other. "If it be a mere matter of almsgiving, you cannot object to this lady choosing for almoner whom she thinks fit."

"It must be given to this person," said Dolores, "or there will be trouble to the lady and to me, Lord ——"

She paused, not liking to use his name before Mr. Stoney. He finished her sentence by adding quietly:

"Porthleven."

Mr. Stoney threw up hands and eyes.

"Lilian Pomeroy!" he exclaimed. "Is this the society you affect? Are you aware that Lord Porthleven is a man of sin, separated by his infamous conduct from his wife? A dicer, a drinker, a frequenter of the company of immoral females of the lowest class?"

"Yes," returned Lord Porthleven briskly. "Exactly, and in that company he met you. Yes, sir," he continued sternly, "I know you now; you were dancing at a masked ball two nights ago, and your mask was knocked off in a fall; I was looking on and picked you up. Your partner was Floss Debelind; she wore spurs—Vivandière dress—and one cut your forehead in the *mêlée*. Yes, there is the scar."

Mr. Stoney was livid and gasping, he could hardly bring out a denial and say something about a cab accident.

Lord Porthleven smiled in an irritating way.

"Pray do not trouble yourself to explain to this young lady and myself. I can prove what I say; and if, sir, you are ever tempted to give my young friend here, or any other lady, trouble,

I will not only make that little matter public, but I will set on a sharp detective to follow up your tracks. Dolores, put up your note-case and permit me to have this gentleman shown out."

"Who is that fellow, and why was he blackmailing you, child?" asked Lord Porthleven coolly, as the door closed on the cowed hypocrite.

"His name is Middington Stoney," said Dolores slowly.

"Middington Stoney? Ah! to be sure, Middington was a stockbroker—worthy, honest man. I did business with him. Wife was an angular saint, and afterwards married a light of the religious world," remarked Lord Porthleven, who knew every one and had a wonderful memory. "Pah, what a cursed blackguard the scoundrel is. Well, he will not annoy you again, I fancy. It would put his candle out a bit if the other saints knew he went to places that are almost too bad for a sinner like myself. You have not told me what you were going to pay him to do or leave undone."

"No, Lord Porthleven, nor am I going to do so," replied Dolores firmly. "Are these roses for me? Thank you so much."

"Yes, they are, of course, as you will have nothing better, little fool that you are. What are you going to do to-day? Ride?"

"No; practise a new dance that I have thought out, so I must send you away," said the girl with a laugh.

"You will work yourself to death; you had much better do as I ask you, little one. What does it matter to us if people talk? My wife did not choose to get a divorce; it's her pious way of paying me out, or I'd marry you to-morrow, but as I can't, I offer the best substitute in my power. A pleasant life, lots to spend, go where you like, have a good time, and something to live on when I go off the hooks, secured. Come, what do you say?"

"No, a thousand times no!" said Dolores, flushing crimson and turning white by turns.

"You're a silly girl; any other in your position would jump at the offer," said Lord Porthleven.

"Then give them the chance."

"Thanks, my dear; I happen to want you you silly, prudish

child, and I'll have what I want, too," replied Lord Porthleven rising.

"Never," said Dolores with emphasis.

"Never's a long day. Come, we won't quarrel. Good-bye."

Lord Porthleven went off and promptly investigated the history of the Pomeroy family; it was easy enough to place "Dolores," having learnt her real name, and a Devonshire friend told his lordship about the bank failure, and putting two and two together it did not take Lord Porthleven long to get a pretty good idea of what had driven Lilian Pomeroy to her present position, and to guess that her blind mother was kept in ignorance, and that Mr. Stoney endeavoured to put the screw on by threatening disclosure. And, anathematizing him once more, meditated as to how far his own plans would be furthered by the other's meanness.

Lord Porthleven was no saint. His wife had long been separated from him, and posed as a model of feminine perfection; perhaps, as people said, she was far too good for her ex lord and master. Marble statues are exquisite things in their way, but frail human nature is apt to weary of their stony charms and to sigh for mere flesh and blood. Lord Porthleven was no exception; he could have been kept faithful and devoted enough by a far less exalted type of womanhood: a creature with smiles and tears and coquettish ways, who would have flown in passions and scolded roundly, and made up the quarrel with kisses, and could have enjoyed fun and flirtation on her own account. Lady Porthleven was above frivolities; a beautiful intellectual being who moved through her world and went into society as a matter of duty, and remained superior to all that her sex usually appreciate. In short, a statue; and Lord Porthleven wanted a wife. So they parted, and he endeavoured to give her the chance of setting herself free, and she, having exalted ideas on the subject of divorce, and perhaps an undeveloped feminine weakness for revenge, would not move in the matter. And he was still in the eye of the law her husband, and cared little that he was bound, in fact declared it was a protection.

Now he had some faint longings for freedom. A girl's red-gold hair, dark eyes and creamy-white skin aroused his desire to be unfettered, and able to offer marriage instead of gilded dishonour. For, although he had for many years effectually stifled

his conscience and found nothing in the women he knew to awaken it, his instincts of manhood taught him to feel some respect for this lonely child, who was, according to her lights, doing her best to live a clean, honourable life, and to deny herself for her mother's sake, even while she deceived her.

Women were an easily read book to Lord Porthleven, and he had long known that Dolores lived simply, and could not be tempted by the luxuries which half her sex willingly barter their souls for.

There is more joy in the heart of man over one woman that resisteth than in the over-willing ninety-nine that fall to his wiles before they are really tempted; and Dolores was a prize worth some exertion. So day by day Lord Porthleven showed her such attention as he might have offered to a princess without offence.

Champagne dinners, showy trinkets, and the display which attracts the vulgar were not in his programme.

Dainty flowers, the occasional loan of a perfect riding horse for a pleasant canter, not in the park or streets, but from some remote country station in clover and hay scented lanes. Books, clever reviews or magazines, excursions on the river, and visits to pretty country places, where Lord Porthleven himself rarely appeared, but Dolores found everything planned for her to the most minute details. All this consideration naturally moved the girlish heart to warm gratitude. She began to believe Lord Porthleven a kind of second father, a true, disinterested friend.

The hot dusty season was wearing to an end, every one who could leave London began to "babble of green fields," or of smart country houses and fashionable watering places; but still the Frivolity was crammed to suffocation nightly, and Dolores as much an attraction as ever. The Lost Soul waltzes were played in every ball-room and warbled by every musical damsel. The saucy, lively songs from other scenes had long been reproduced on barrel organs and whistled by street boys; the piece was a success, and Dolores must appear, however sick of it all she might be. To relieve the monotony to herself she had invented fresh and original dances, with marvellous dresses which were part of the performance, and the cut and arrangement of the draperies a secret which was successfully kept, for the cripple Betty made them, and would have resisted any attempt

at bribery. Dolores had given her first-class lessons in dress-making, and she was delighted to carry out fresh ideas. The weeks went by and Dolores at length got a holiday, chiefly through Lord Porthleven's aid, and hastened down to the little cottage to her mother's arms.

She had counted the very hours, but the joy of the meeting was not what she had pictured so fondly, for in the worn delicate face her quick eyes saw serious change, and Jael when questioned confessed uneasiness as to Mrs. Pomeroy's health, though her fears took no decided form, and no doctor had been consulted.

Lilian lost no time in sending for the best local practitioner, who spoke pleasantly of trying weather, loss of tone, and mild tonics to Mrs. Pomeroy herself; and having reassured her till she was able to joke with him about her daughter's too-anxious affection and beg him to declare that her only ailment was being spoilt till she grew fanciful, the doctor left her, and taking Lilian out of earshot told her that he greatly feared that a serious, if not fatal and most painful, malady was impending.

He was a kindly man, and it was a hard task to break such news and see the girl's lovely face whiten, the dark eyes grow large with unshed tears, and the sweet red lips tighten with repressed feeling; but he held that the plain truth told concisely was most merciful, and when he had spoken Lilian asked a few questions quietly.

The doctor answered them, telling her that her mother's case would have been thought hopeless once, but modern science had devised means of cure by operation, and though the remedy was desperate perhaps, it had proved successful.

"Would you undertake it?" asked the daughter, with quivering lips.

"No, certainly not; in country practice one does not acquire the necessary experience, and, in fact, only one or two London and Parisian surgeons are competent," replied the doctor.

A few more questions elicited the names of these men of science, and the probable cost. Dr. Meadows had recently sent a patient to London who was cured by the treatment, and could give definite information, but thinking of the tiny cottage he had left he hinted that he could inquire as to hospitals taking such cases.

Lilian shook her head resolutely.

"Dr. Meadows," she said, "you see what my darling mother is—blind, fragile, utterly dependent on our old nurse. It would kill her to undergo such a terrible trial among strangers, however good and kind to her. I will get money somehow, and she shall be with Jael and myself."

"It would be far better," returned the doctor, marvelling in private how this slender pretty creature was going to find such a sum. The little cottage was very far from Pomeroy Manor, but still in the country people's antecedents are known, and he, of course, knew the story of the Pomeroy's and of their ruin; however, he only said warmly, holding the girl's hand in a kindly clasp:

"Rely on me, Miss Pomeroy, for any help, advice, or, in short, anything. Write or come to me; I will do all in my power for yourself and your mother. Remember, I am not absolutely certain yet, so hope for the best."

There was little doubt in his own mind as he rode away; and in a very short time Lilian, once more back at her weary work, her identity merged into that of Dolores, the dancer, received the verdict that made the painful doubt an agonizing certainty.

In her distress she went to her aunt's house, determined to humiliate herself to any extent to obtain help, but was sternly refused admission by the sour maid, who did not even soften the refusal by saying her mistress was engaged, but bluntly assured Lilian that she was never to set foot in the house again.

Returning home the girl poured out her sorrows and fears in a piteous imploring letter to Mrs. Middington Stoney, but it was returned unopened.

A telegram, begging for an interview, received no answer.

It was hopeless, and in her despair she summoned Lord Porthleven, who came promptly from the country at her bidding.

Moved as he had never before seen her, she told him all her trouble, and with tearful eyes and quivering lips, ended by saying:

"I have no one to turn to as my aunt will not listen to me. Oh, Lord Porthleven, for the sake of all you ever held dear, do not you fail me too."

"Calm yourself, my child," he replied gently. "Your mother shall have all that money can give her. She must be brought at once to London and see this specialist, and afterwards, when

she is better, as you say the winters try her so, you shall take her away into some place of perpetual sunshine, and she will be stronger than ever, and never have another care or anxiety."

In an ecstasy of delight and gratitude Lilian threw herself at his feet and kissed his hands.

"How can I thank you? How can I repay you? I am promised a much higher salary, and the money I may soon return, but the goodness and kindness never, never, never!"

Lord Porthleven paused, his better feelings prompted him to give all without asking a return, but the girl was so lovely and winning, and he had long ceased to resist temptation. Drawing her to him he whispered:

"All this and much more will I do, Dolores, but only if you promise to give your sweet self to me."

"Anything but that," she cried, starting up hastily. "Let me repay you the money, be your servant, your debtor; and with my last breath I will bless you, but not that. Oh, don't ask that of me!"

"And why not?" asked Lord Porthleven. "I am too old for you, perhaps, my child, but my love is no mere boy's fancy. I can gratify every wish, and I swear that our union shall be till death, as much as if half-a-dozen priests had tied the knot. What more do you want?"

"Only peace of mind and honour," said Dolores gently. "What would my mother or any good, pure woman think of me if I acceded to your wishes?"

"Your mother need never know that our marriage, for it would be such in the sight of heaven, is not quite according to the rules invented by society. As for other women, is your aunt a sample of the Christianity which you believe in? Dolores, when you are my age you will see what a hollow sham self-righteousness is, and believe that there are truer forms of goodness than these canting religionists uphold."

Dolores shook her head and answered:

"I cannot argue, I am not clever enough, but I know right from wrong."

"Or think you do," said her companion. "Well, little one, I will leave you to consider whether, for a mere dogma and empty belief, you will let your mother suffer long-protracted torture and die an agonizing death; or whether you will trust your future to

a man who loves and respects you with all his heart, and will spare nothing to shield your mother from suffering, and leave no wish of your own unfulfilled. What will people say of us? Why, we will not ask. My yacht shall be our home, and we will spend our lives in lovely places where none will know or care, and my pearl shall be admired and fêted by every one, and your mother shall never again be parted from you."

It was a long speech for Lord Porthleven, but he was thoroughly in earnest, and having said his say, took his leave abruptly. And Dolores, throwing herself in the one armchair that her small room contained, sat thinking and thinking with white set face, heedless of the time, till her landlady, who was a good-hearted simple woman, came to warn her that it was late, and beg her to have some food before going to the theatre. Dolores could not eat, but drank some tea eagerly and thirstily. She had scarcely time to dress for her part, but her helper was prompt, and she hastened to the wings and paused there, looking with unseeing eyes straight before her; a picturesque figure in a marvellous costume, ready to charm the audience with her Thistle Down dance, a novelty of her own creation, which was voted her *chef d'œuvre*.

A voice by her side said:

"A gentleman wishes to be introduced to you, Mademoiselle Dolores."

With a start she turned to confront the author and Dick Trevelyan. For one instant they were both speechless, then, recovering herself by an effort, Dolores said hastily:

"Pardon my leaving you abruptly; later in the evening I shall have great pleasure in making the acquaintance of—Captain Trevelyan? Yes, *au revoir*."

She disappeared on to the stage, and Dick Trevelyan started, as if shot, at the noisy clapping that greeted the favourite of the public, and followed her till the author caught hold of him and inquired, with a laugh, if he wanted to join in the ballet.

"Come to the front, Trevelyan; the dance is well worth seeing, I can assure you," he added. "It's caught on, but then it's inspiring to have such a girl to carry out one's ideas."

Manlike, he did not say for how much of the idea he was indebted to the girl, but once in front he merely explained that the scene was called the Thistle Down dance, and gave himself

up for at least the fiftieth time to rapt admiration of the dance and his own accompanying music.

It was in truth tuneful and pretty, well fitted to the meadow with its soft plummy grass, and broad rippling brook reflecting sunset lights, which was the background, and in front Dolores, marvellously costumed to represent thistle down, skimmed, swayed and moved almost as lightly as the real thing under the boughs of great trees.

Tiny elves peeped out of the branches or from under tall foxgloves and ferns, each armed with a great flower trumpet, through which they began to blow at the Thistle Down fairy; merrily she swayed this way and that as they blew from various points of vantage, or chased her about the stage; finally, as they united in one vigorous effort, she rose from the ground at first but a foot or two, but gradually went higher and higher, apparently blown away by the mischievous elves right across the meadow grass till she floated over the river and was lost to view.

It was a triumph of stage mechanism, but very few artistes could have availed themselves of its aid with such fearless grace as Dolores; and it was no wonder that thunders of applause nightly recognized this fact.

Dick gazed as in a trance. He had believed his love for Lilian Pomeroy dead—was, in fact, engaged to the American heiress; and behold it had revived fiercely, madly, rendering him heedless of all else. Dolores the dancer might be the vile, lost woman people declared her, to him she was the girl whose soft lips he had kissed in the old Devonshire garden, and whose yielding form had been clasped to his heart. She was his Lilian, his first and only real love.

Would this terrible play never end? The music rang in his ears, the lights dazzled him, the whole thing was without meaning and chaotic.

"Ah, again!" and he leant forward with hungry, eager eyes fixed on one figure, as again Dolores appeared to go through the part, luckily so familiar to her that she could not make any error.

At last, heaven be praised! at last the accursed thing was over, and Dick, half mad with the restraint he had put on himself, hurried to the back to await the public favourite.

She came after a brief delay, cloaked and ready to go home.

She had schooled herself well, and by no tremor of word or glance betrayed what Dick was to her.

Her cold, gracious reserve braced him also, and taking his cue from her, he spoke as any stranger might in admiration, of her dancing, and when, declining invitations to supper parties, she accepted his escort to the little brougham which always fetched her, she did not alter her manner, though with a pressure that was almost cruel he caught her hand and whispered:

"For God's sake tell me when I can see you alone to-morrow."

In the same quiet, repressed voice she replied, naming an early hour at her rooms, and only as the brougham drove off gave way to blinding tears and sobs which shook her from head to foot.

Dick did not keep her waiting next day, and at the sight of the simply-dressed girl, with a loose soft knot of hair, he lost the haunting vision of the dancer, with every charm made the most of to attract the eyes of men.

"Lilian, my darling, have I found you at last?" he cried. "My own love, nothing shall part us again."

"You forget," she answered gravely, "your father forbade our marriage, and you, Dick—you did not even send a few lines to say good-bye in answer to mine."

"I got but one letter," said Dick, "and in that you forbade my writing."

"Your father dictated it, but I wrote after to you," she replied.

"I never had that letter," he said eagerly. "Lilian, darling, what a brute you must have thought me; but we were in the hills, fighting, and—oh, never mind now—say you will marry me at once, darling."

"Your father rejected Lilian Pomeroy for no fault but poverty; to Dolores, the dancer, he might well object. You must know what is said of me."

"But it is not true!" cried Dick hastily; "no one could look in your sweet eyes and believe a word against you."

"It is not true, but who would believe me now?" said the girl sadly.

With a passionate exclamation Dick caught her in his arms, raining kisses on her lips, her eyes, her hair.

"Come with me, my own," he said; "marry me at once. I will send in my papers and we will go abroad. I know of one of

ours doing right well in Texas; you would not fear that life with me, would you?"

For a few moments Lilian gave herself up to his caresses unresistingly, clasping her arms about his neck, then suddenly drew back.

"Dick," she murmured, "don't tempt me; I can't, I can't—my mother is blind, and perhaps dying; it is impossible."

Turning to a table, she took a letter from Dr. Meadows and gave it to him. In plain words the urgency of the case was stated, and the expense of the operation, which the doctor had ascertained for her accurately.

The sum was a large one—Dick's face fell. He had not a quarter of it at his bank.

"My God, the curse that poverty is!" he cried bitterly, throwing down the letter. "Lilian, is there no other way? must you be sacrificed? Cannot Mrs. Pomeroy go elsewhere as well as to this place, and how can you raise this money?"

"There are ways, and it can be done," returned Lilian firmly, with a strange light in her resolute eyes. "But I cannot marry you, Dick."

Then he lost his head, and implored her, and accused her of coldness, and while he raved at and prayed to her by turns, her own heart was pleading for him more earnestly than he could speak for himself, and it was all she could do not to throw herself in his arms and tell him how dear he was to her.

But between her and happiness rose the vision of the dying father's mute appeal, and her own voluntarily assumed charge and her oath.

"At any cost to myself," she thought, "I will give myself, my soul and body, for her, since there is no pity in earth or heaven."

Half-an-hour later Dick was striding from her door as if pursued by demons, and Dolores lay in a dead faint on the floor of her room, while out in the street a barrel organ slowly ground out the air of:

"Heaven's gates are closed to me,
Since my love ceased to woo."

And the afternoon post carried the briefest of notes to Lord Porthleven, merely, "Come back to me.—DOLORES." He lost no time in obeying its summons, and in place of the resolute, defiant

girl he had left, found a trembling, white-faced creature, with eyes that looked as if sleep were a stranger to them, and quivering, piteous lips.

"What have you done to yourself, child? And why have you sent for me?" he said kindly.

"I wish to tell you that if you still care for me . . ." She paused and looked up at him, and drawing her gently to him, Lord Porthleven said:

"I will never give you cause to repent your trust in me," and kissed her forehead gravely.

Then, as if to reassure her, he put her in a chair, and taking another at the other side of the table, asked news of her mother, sketched out the plan necessary for Mrs. Pomeroy's removal, dictated a letter to Dr. Meadows, authorizing him to take all steps and accompany the invalid if desirable, and quietly forced bank notes on the girl to inclose in her letter, silencing all remonstrance, and bidding her use any reserve fund she had for herself.

He then, assuming without question that Mrs. Pomeroy knew nothing of her daughter's profession, discussed the very remote chance of Jael making any discoveries, and was altogether so kind and matter-of-fact, that the misery and shame that Lilian had felt seemed to vanish in his presence, for though Lord Porthleven might be worthless morally, he had infinite tact, and was bent on winning the girl's heart as well as herself. He even refrained from any allusion to the relations that would be henceforth established between himself and her, merely taking the right to settle everything for her.

The piece she was in would only run a very short time longer, and she begged to finish her engagement. "Old Crusty," the manager, had shown her kindness, and her withdrawal, even under heavy forfeit, would be a loss to him.

Lord Porthleven assented for her own sake and partly for his own. He was absolutely indifferent as a rule to public opinion, and made no secret of the fact that at different times fair, frail actresses had been indebted to him for their smart villas and showy equipages, unlimited indulgence in every form of extravagance and similar delights; but those affairs seemed to him different, mere common, vulgar *liaisons* with disreputable women. To Dolores he had at first been attracted by her beauty, but as

he came to know her better she inspired him with sincere admiration of her character ; he saw her brave and self-reliant, pure amid temptations, quiet and ladylike in her home, and capable of true deep love by her devotion to her blind mother ; and cursing the fate that bound him to a relentless woman, he determined, if she would but trust him, to devote his remaining years to her, as if she were the wife he could not make her. He desired to keep the matter a secret now that fate had forced her to yield. Once away from England he cared not what was said of them both ; but Dolores should be shielded while yet within reach of malicious cruel tongues.

Mrs. Pomeroy was brought safely to London, and the surgeon's verdict proved satisfactory : he considered her case curable. Explanation as to the manner in which her expenses were defrayed could no longer be withheld from her, for though unworldly, she was not wanting in clear common sense, and knew that it was not likely that a young girl could be earning money enough to pay for an invalid carriage and apartments, which were perfect in every detail, besides the attendance of a specialist and other expensive items.

Lord Porthleven had foreseen this, and was quite prepared ; he bade Dolores leave all to him, and she obeyed him passively, in the gentle indifferent fashion which had grown on her of late.

Together they went to visit Mrs. Pomeroy, and Lord Porthleven bade her feel her daughter's left hand, on which was a wedding ring ; then, while in tearful anxiety the blind mother implored to be told all, he assured her that they had only been anxious to spare her all agitation, such as a mother must feel in giving her only child to a stranger, but that her new son now implored her forgiveness, and trusted that she would learn to regard him as wholly devoted to the daughter who was so precious to her.

Few men had a more admirable choice of words or more pleasing voice, and once the shock of the revelation was over Mrs. Pomeroy was charmed with the "son-in-law," who had showed such kindness of heart and liberality.

Lord Porthleven had privately regarded the fact of Mrs. Pomeroy's existence as a bore, but her sweetness and refinement reminded him of his own dead mother, and he found himself decidedly attracted and pleased with the fragile, helpless woman,

who believed so implicitly in the lie that was more sacred than truth, and thanked him with such warmth for all he had done for her.

To use his title would have been incurring risk of detection. Lilian had been taught to call him by his Christian name of Maurice, and to Mrs. Pomeroy he gave his family name of Eaton, which was sufficiently common to attract no attention if she spoke to any one of her "married" daughter.

So far nothing could be more satisfactory, and Lord Porthleven felt as if he had recovered the halcyon days of his lost youth. He longed like a boy for the hour when he could bid the sailors raise the yacht's anchor, and let the good boat bear them away from London, with its worries, anxieties and spiteful tongues, to the lovely far-off islands of the South Pacific, where amid Arcadian scenes he fancied himself living in a kind of idyll with the girl who had grown so dear to him. Nor did the idea of Mrs. Pomeroy's presence annoy him; the gentle blind lady was not likely to be a jarring note in the harmony, and her servant, a fisherman's daughter, would be a capital attendant for Lilian, as well as her mother; he wanted no sharp, ordinary lady's-maid about her, to pry into secrets.

The time passed rapidly, Mrs. Pomeroy had borne the operation better even than was anticipated, and Lilian, feeling her sacrifice repaid, endeavoured to prove her gratitude to Lord Porthleven; and he, delighted by her altered manner, which he hoped indicated a warmer feeling, came one day with a quantity of jewel cases.

"I have brought my family diamonds for you to see, child," he said. "I think some of them would suit you; others must be re-set."

There was a flash as of the sun on water as he opened the cases and the great stones shone and sparkled.

For a moment the girl gazed on them in mute delight; it was not in the heart of woman to be indifferent to such splendid diamonds. Then suddenly remembering what she was to him, she flushed crimson to the brow, and turned away to hide her face.

"I could not," she said sobbing, "I could not wear them; I have no right."

In a moment his arm was round her and her head pillowed on

his shoulder tenderly ; with fond words he tried to console her and then, as the sobs grew less violent, to persuade her that he had full power to give her the jewels during his life.

Lilian did not disengage herself from the sheltering arm, but at length said firmly :

"Maurice, I want to tell you, once for all, that not one of your thousand acts of kindness to me is unnoticed. With all my heart and soul I thank you for them, and some day, when we are a long, long way off, I may forget—a little—what I am—and repay you much better than I can now ; but these would shame me every time I looked at them. I should feel I was just a common creature who had sold herself for diamonds and show, and I would never have done that."

And she broke down again, but in her grief for the first time clung to him as if she realized a little all he felt for her, and that he was her only hope and protection ; and when at last she recovered composure Lord Porthleven closed the cases and said, smiling :

"My pet, you shall have your own way in everything, but I may at least give you a few trinkets if you do not care for these."

"I do not care much for jewellery at all, I think," replied Lilian. "You see Dolores the dancer's Parisian company stones have put me out of conceit of them."

"I wonder what would really please you as a present?" said Lord Porthleven. "You have such simple tastes, child."

"I will tell you, Maurice," she replied, with her eyes brightening and a smile dimpling her cheeks. "The lease of a little millinery shop."

"What on earth do you want with that? Has the fashionable craze of turning shopkeeper bitten you, too? I'm afraid, madam, it won't pay while you are in the Antipodes yachting," he said jokingly.

"I'm afraid it wouldn't," replied Lilian ; "but I'll explain, if you get into that chair."

And, taking a low seat at Lord Porthleven's feet, Lilian proceeded to tell him of her humble friends, Kit and Betty ; and how Kit would marry her Bill if they could afford it ; and Betty and she could do a thriving trade, if only they had rooms and a shop, Betty being so clever.

And if Lord Porthleven cared little enough for philanthropy, he was delighted with anything that brightened his darling's eyes and brought a smile to her lips.

So he gave Lilian *carte blanche* to settle the girls who had befriended her in her need, telling her that nothing was too much to ask of him. And she went off gaily, forgetting all her troubles in the pleasure of making others happy.

Kit's ecstasies were even enough to satisfy her benefactress, and Bill, who chanced to be there, though rather tongue-tied, was clearly most grateful and pleased. But Betty, instead of showing joy, stamped passionately, and cried out angrily :

"I be surprised at yer, Kit hand Bill, that I be! Carn't yer see it's just gettin' rid hof hus, she is. I don't want yer money and yer fust-class little shops, Miss Dolores ; take hit away."

And then breaking into a storm of noisy tears and cries, she grovelled at Lilian's feet, kissing her dress.

"Oh, don't, don't go, my hown darlin'," she cried. "I wants nothin' but to see yer face and 'ear yer voice, my dear, beautiful princess. You've bore hall my beastly tempers, and been just as sweet to me has if I wasn't crooked hand hugly and 'orrid. I'll die hif yer goes, that I will."

Lilian did her best to console the poor girl, who, in spite of her deformed person and cankered temper, could love so devotedly the friend who had been a sunbeam in her darkened life.

Shirking the question of departure, she bade Bill get a cab, and took the sisters to the shop they had long coveted, though never dreamt could be theirs, and even got Betty to take interest in the details which concerned her work, and lulled her suspicions by talking of future dresses to be designed for herself ; finally letting them be happy in giving her a tea which embodied their ideas of luxury, and then drove on to see her mother and hear her weak voice cheerfully talking of the goodness of "Mr. Eaton," and the blessing it was to her that her darling was so fortunate as to be his wife, and would be shielded from all trouble and anxiety by his love, as long as they were spared to each other.

Had Lilian Pomeroy fallen into the hands of a different man she would have gone through a very hell of remorse, but so far

she was tenderly guarded from all outer influence calculated to wound her sensitive nature.

She was so young still and so impressionable that she had begun insensibly to believe that Lord Porthleven was right in maintaining that, under the circumstances, the tie between them was a true and pure marriage in the sight of heaven.

Perhaps, too, the months spent as the favourite of the public had slightly deadened her sense of right and wrong, but at any rate to her own surprise she began to feel that her future need not be a blank, a mere weary existence given up to passive endurance, but that fresh interests and happiness would be quite possible.

Her passionate love for her mother and deep gratitude to Lord Porthleven were strong moving springs, but apart from these there was the girlish love of travel and adventure, and the natural longing for change and an easy life, inherent in most minds.

Lord Porthleven himself could hardly be more anxious to start for fresh scenes than Lilian was growing.

The "Gitana," a fine steamer-yacht of some 500 tons, was being fitted out regardless of cost for a long ocean cruise, and Lilian had been down once to see her and suggest any further improvements if possible; but the dainty freshness of the pretty state-rooms, and perfect though costly simplicity of the saloons and deck house, left nothing to be desired, and the novelty of it all charmed its future mistress, who became interested and delighted to an unwonted degree.

The "Gitana" had been quietly put in commission at a small unfrequented place to avoid exciting curiosity, and when ready would pick up her owner and his party at Harwich, starting as soon as they were on board.

Mrs. Pomeroy had regained strength so rapidly that she felt quite equal to the move, and was most anxious not to delay her "son-in-law," or become a drag on him.

The last day dawned, and Lilian, after a morning visit to her mother, was busily engaged in her rooms sorting her possessions and destroying many relics of the past.

Dick's letters had been burnt before she gave herself to Lord Porthleven, but one little keepsake remained. As a schoolboy he had bought for her birthday a locket, set with

a tiny turquoise forget-me-not ; a trinket of very small value, but it called up a thousand memories, and her tears fell fast over it.

A knock at the door startled her ; drying her eyes hastily she opened it, and the small servant of the house announced, " There's a gentleman, mum. I put him in the other room, mum ; I dun know who he be."

Lilian was expecting some costumes from Redfern, and concluding it was probable that the " gentleman " was come to fit them on, did not hurry herself much.

When she entered the sitting-room, which was littered with very obvious traces of packing, the visitor was pacing up and down impatiently, and with a feeling akin to dismay she saw as he faced her that it was Dick Trevelyan himself, looking excited and eager.

Without waiting for any commonplace greeting he sprang forward, and seizing her hand, cried triumphantly :

" My darling, at last I can claim you ! I am independent—have money of my own—nothing can come between us—an old uncle died last week, and I have come into two thousand a year and a nice little house in Kent."

Then, as his eyes met hers, he stopped suddenly, startled by the look of despair and horror in her pale face.

" Lilian, what is it ? Surely, my heart's darling, you are as thankful as I am that this money came to me in time to let me make you my wife."

With an effort she answered, after two or three vain attempts :

" Too late, too late, Dick !"

" Oh," he cried, " I know ; you have seen my engagement in the society papers. Well, it's true, darling ; I drifted into it. She's American, you know—pretty, smart, rich ; she—I oughtn't to say so, but it's a fact—it's mostly her doing. I didn't care what became of me. She will take another—lots of fellows are after her."

" I never heard of her before," said Lilian. " It's not that, Dick ; but oh, go back to her ! Don't ask me anything—forget me—I can never, never marry you."

Dick fixed his eyes sternly on her.

" Lilian, what is this mystery ? I will know. Have you ceased to love me ?"

She could not answer in the affirmative. She could deceive her blind mother, but her face would have betrayed her had she tried to lie to the strong, masterful, but passionately fond lover, who had been all in all to her, and yet was the one man in the world that held her heart.

With drooping head she stood silent ; there was a pause, then Dick said :

"Lilian, answer me, darling. Are you married ?"

Still she kept silent, and glancing round, he noticed for the first time the evident signs of packing.

"You are leaving," he cried hastily. "With whom are you going ?"

"With my mother," was the reply.

"Where to ?" he questioned sharply.

"Abroad to recruit her health," said Lilian in low tones.

"What has this to do with our marriage, Lilian ? You know I would follow you anywhere, and marry you when and where you please. My dearest, do not torture me ; tell me all."

Lower and lower the fair head drooped ; the crimson blushes of shame rose, then receded, and a few words came in gasps from her stiffly-set white lips.

Dick staggered back as if shot when their import dawned on him, then seeing Lilian turn as if to leave him, with a low quivering moan as of some dying creature, he caught her once more in his arms, protesting passionately that by all he held sacred he cared nothing for what she had confessed, and entreating her to marry him and free herself from her present position, and he would adore her till his dying day.

But with sudden strength she pushed him from her, crying wildly :

"Go, Dick, go ! Oh, for God's sake don't make it harder ! I tell you once for all, there is no turning back for me now. My mother believes me married ; the truth would kill her."

"Who is the man ?" exclaimed Dick suddenly. "I will kill him as sure as there is a God above us. Stay ; I know, Lilian ; it is Lord Porthleven."

"You have no right to ask, and I will not answer," returned Lilian firmly.

"You cannot deny it," said Dick. "He is a blackguard—a

—oh, it's no good abusing him. My darling, why should you sacrifice yourself?"

"My oath!" Lilian cried, "my oath to my dying father. I swore to him that I would shield my mother from pain at any cost. I have kept it, even if I have lost my soul. God help me, my life has been too hard for me."

With a sudden movement she eluded her lover's grasp and was gone.

Dick, left alone, paced about; threw himself into a chair, thinking hard; finally rang the bell and asked to see Mademoiselle Dolores for a moment.

The small domestic, with a grin, informed him she had sent for a hansom and gone out.

"To avoid me," muttered Dick, cursing the ingenuity of woman, and leaving the house in a savage mood, he determined not to be baffled, but to snatch Lilian from her possessor at any risk to her mother or his own prospects.

The softness of love was for the moment extinguished, and the brute fierceness latent in most men had the upper hand. Revenge on his powerful rival was moving Dick's soul more than passion for the frail girl he loved so dearly in cooler moments.

As he strode on a dense fog swooped rapidly down on the street; it had threatened all day, and now grew thicker. Suddenly, as Dick passed the door of a club, he saw Lord Porthleven ahead of him, the light of a lamp just catching his profile sufficiently to allow Dick to recognize him.

With a mad desire for vengeance Dick hastened after him, grasping the heavy stick he carried with a murderous impulse.

He would have caught up Lord Porthleven immediately, but from a side street a lot of half-scared children ran out suddenly, with a crying baby in a rickety perambulator; and this miserable conveyance was dashed by its small driver right against Dick's legs, almost throwing him down, and upsetting the luckless baby into the street. Out of the fog stepped a policeman; the wretched screaming infant was saved from the wheels of a cab, and Dick hurried on; but the short detention had given Lord Porthleven a start, and in the darkness he could no longer be distinguished, having, in fact, turned off to take a short cut.

Baffled and raging, Dick next tried to buy a stall ticket for the last performance at the Frivolity, but could not even get the worst place in the cheapest part of the theatre, much less a stall. Never mind, he would go to the pit ; but at his club he found a note from his *fiancée*, saying they had, by a chance, got a box, and he must join them at the Frivolity if he could not come to dinner. He could not command himself enough to go through a conventional meal with his betrothed, but he would go to the box later.

Miss Melcy Fulsom, exquisitely attired in the latest creation of a Parisian dressmaker, received him graciously enough when he joined her, and assured him that she had "Never seen anything so purely elegant as that sweet creature Dolores, and wondered any man could see her and keep his heart sound."

Luckily, she was rather engrossed with the stage, and her *chaperone* was placid and sleepy, so Dick could remain at the back of the box and gaze at the one being who might have been alone on the boards for all he saw of her companions.

Presently more men joined them, and began to flirt vigorously with Miss Fulsom, Dick's presence adding a little piquancy to the amusement.

"See Porthleven below there in the stalls?" drawled one. "He's awfully gone on Dolores, but she won't look at him. Now, Miss Fulsom, try my glasses ; this is the Thistle Down dance, w'eally the pwettiest thing of the play, don't you know."

The dainty rippling music began, and every eye was fixed on the lovely dancer ; her graceful movements became yet more and more rapid. She was surpassing herself, and as the tiny fairies chased her, blowing vigorously with all their might, the American heiress, growing yet more enthusiastic, slipped a jewelled bangle from her arm, clasped it round her costly bouquet, and threw the flowers with so true an aim that they fell uninjured at the feet of Dolores, who, looking up to smile her thanks, met Dick's eyes, and with quick intuition divined from whom she had received the gift, and, womanlike, noted accurately the smallest details of dress and appearance of the girl to whom her lover had plighted his faith, while his heart was given to his first love. But the public, gazing with eager eyes at the graceful scene, only saw that their favourite and her little elves were excelling themselves on this last night.

Dolores rose slowly from the ground, still swaying in tune to the bright music, and waving a laughing adieu to the tiny sprites who still blew vigorously through their flower trumpets.

Suddenly, as the theatre echoed with the thunder of clapping and shouts of irrepressible admirers, there was a sharp crack, a heavy fall, and a white figure lay motionless on the stage, face down, with arms outstretched, and the scared children, screaming loudly, flew in all directions wildly.

Lord Porthleven sprang across the footlights, but, though he lost not a second, a workman was already raising the drooping head with tender touch, and sobbing like a child as he exclaimed :

"I told 'em I knowed it ; I said it warn't safe. Oh, miss, miss, do hopen your eyes ! Kit and Bet 'll break their 'earts. If only they'd let me put fresh fixins as I wanted to——"

The curtain fell ; there was a buzz of talk among the audience, and Melcy Fulsom, with a kindly impulse, sprang up and said :

"If no other woman here's going to that poor soul, I am. I'm just a daisy hand at helping ; we'd plenty of accidents down west. Come on, Dick."

Then, as she looked in his face, like a flash his soul was laid bare to her and his secret known.

With a grasp of his hand that a man might have given a friend at his need, she whispered :

"Dick, I see. Never mind me. You know I'm not mean. Just take no more notice of me than if I was a real nurse, and waste no time, but come."

Miss Fulsom had not overrated her capabilities. With some difficulty they gained admission to the room, where Dolores lay on a hastily improvised couch of gaily coloured cushions and other stage properties. Two or three other actresses were there, kind-hearted and willing, but nervous and of little use.

The cool, practical, deft-handed American came just in time to be invaluable to the two surgeons, who finished their examination and stood aside consulting with grave looks. In a corner honest Bill the carpenter gave occasional vent to his feelings in a smothered sob or sniff.

Dick Trevelyan was restless and utterly overcome. Lord Porthleven remained silent and was absolutely still. Melcy

quietly and in a business-like way administered stimulants in minute quantities, watching closely for the faintest sign of consciousness, and presently moved quietly from her patient's side, laid her hand on Lord Porthleven's arm and whispered :

"Her eyes must open on a friend's face, and you are the only one here that can take a grip of his feelings."

Miss Fulsom had observed symptoms of returning animation, and as Dolores slowly opened her dark eyes Lord Porthleven, bending over her, asked her gently with untrembling voice if she felt better.

She answered rather vaguely, and the surgeons, returning to her, with Melcy Fulsom's aid, gave stronger stimulants, and as they took effect life returned more fully and Dolores was able to reply clearly to their few brief questions. Then the men of science had another short conference aside, and stood hesitating as if uncertain to whom their verdict should be given.

Lord Porthleven seeing this joined them, and quietly assuming all responsibility, asked their opinion.

The elder of the two replied decisively: "The poor girl may live an hour, but the case is hopeless; her spine is broken and there are other fatal injuries." He was a man of note, and had given so many similar pieces of intelligence that he was impassive and business-like. His companion, younger and more impressionable by nature, added: "We trust there will be no suffering. Do you know if she has friends or relatives who should be fetched?"

"None," replied Lord Porthleven curtly. "I will remain—to the end."

The junior surgeon thought his cold quiet manner heartless, and set him down mentally as an indifferent stranger; his senior, who had keener perceptions and much experience, saw that it concealed a mortal wound and pitied Lord Porthleven, but merely said kindly:

"Shall I break it to her? In my opinion it is false kindness to leave her in ignorance."

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In Lilian Pomeroy's sweet eyes there was no sign of fear as she learnt her doom.

To Melcy Fulsom she turned, saying in pleading tones :

"I know who you are ; it is good of you to come to me. Am I too bad for you to kiss me just once ?"

"Too bad, my poor dear !" cried the impulsive American ; "I'd give half my fortune to save your life for Dick," and she pressed her fresh red lips warmly to the soft mouth that must so soon be silent for ever, her tears falling fast as she did so.

Lilian's face lit up with a strange radiance as she whispered :

"God bless you. I thought all good women would shrink from me. You will forgive Dick for caring for me, won't you ? We were boy and girl together."

Melcy Fulsom, more moved than ever before in her careless life, could not speak, but putting Dick Trevelyan's hand in the dying girl's, turned away hastily, not to disturb that bitter parting.

What passionate words of agony and regret were murmured no one knew, but in a few moments Lilian, gathering her fast-ebbing strength put him gently from her, saying firmly :

"Good-bye, Dick ; go now, please."

In answer to her appealing eyes Melcy kissed her tenderly once more, and slipping her arm through Dick's, led him from the room unhesitatingly, he being far too stunned and heart-broken to resist her firmness, and in his misery depending visibly on her for comfort.

Lilian gazed after them with a smile on her lips, though tears were on her long lashes.

"He will be happy in time," she thought, with a sharp thrill of pain as she realized how soon even the best beloved are forgotten ; then as her eyes fell on Lord Porthleven, something told her that in one heart would her memory be cherished, and stretching out her hand to him she said softly :

"Maurice, I only want *you* now—please stay with me ; I shall not keep you long."

And as he knelt by her alone she said :

"I think you loved me best of all."

Few words passed between them. Lord Porthleven took on himself the care of the blind mother, to whom the daughter's life had been a voluntary sacrifice.

There were long intervals when Lilian relapsed into semi-unconsciousness, murmuring over and over, "Prayer from my lips is vain." Suddenly her eyes lit up with the strange far-seeing

glance only seen just before death: "Father," she exclaimed, "father, I am coming; I have kept my oath." Then, as if in recognition of the man who bent over her, longing unspeakably for one last word, she murmured vaguely, "I can't stay now; it's my call; my last call. *Au revoir*, Maurice."

And as Lord Porthleven tenderly closed the dark-fringed eyes and pressed his last kiss on the sweet dead face, he said aloud:

"God grant it may be *au revoir*, my darling."

THE END.

Time's Traces.

By MRS. WILL C. HAWKSLEY.

DOST thou hear them, the loud tramping footsteps of Time?

Wheeling, whirling, mocking memories,

Circling, surging, blunting purposes.

Yet onward, ever onward,

Sweeping present into past ;

Still forward, ever forward,

Hasting towards a future vast.

Dost thou see them, the deep-dented footprints of Time?

Treading, kneading, bruising youthfulness,

Stamping, scarring, marring loveliness.

Not pausing, never pausing,

To repair the havoc wrought ;

Nor stopping, ever stopping,

To enforce the lesson taught.

Dost thou feel them, the relentless footmarks of Time?

Smirching, soiling, spoiling enjoyment,

Numbing, dulling, quenching excitement.

And stifling, ever stifling,

Passion's ardour, love's sweet pain,

Whilst raking, ever raking,

All the fire from nerve and brain.

Dost thou fear it, the resistless footfall of Time?

Crushing, rushing, toiling upward,

Pressing, pushing, struggling Homeward.

So tending, ever tending,

From darkness to the light ;

Thus freeing, ever freeing,

Earth-bound man from nature's blight.

A Modern Eve.

By LILIAN HOLT.

"YOU have come just in time, Helen ; I was sure I could rely on you," and Leslie Glyndon looked up at his sister, who had arrived in answer to an urgent telegram, telling her of his terrible accident. "Yes," he went on, "it is a general smash up ; I know that there is no hope." He paused, then added, "My poor little Stewart ; you will care for her, Helen ? she is my all."

Mrs. Fenton nodded an assent, she could not speak ; it seemed so pitiful to see her brother, who had always been the personification of health and strength, now lying a helpless wreck. A spasm of agony crossed his face, he gasped for breath, then made a sign to her to bend down.

"Remember," he panted, the effort to speak causing beads of perspiration to stand on his forehead : "Not one word on *that* subject before she is twenty-five. When she is engaged to be married, give her the packet you will find sealed and directed to her in my private desk. If it should happen that she is not engaged before that age, you may destroy it ; there is no reason she should know . . . my poor child ! Helen, you promise me this ?"

Mrs. Fenton laid her hand on his. "I will do all that you wish, Leslie ; you can trust me."

He closed his eyes with a sigh of relief. "Call Stewart," he murmured.

She came swiftly to his side and sank on her knees by the sofa where he had been first placed.

"Father" she said pleadingly, "tell me, it is not true."

He understood only too well her meaning ; it was so difficult to meet the anxious questioning look full of a terrified eagerness. He gazed at the sweet face so near his own, then whispered tenderly :

"My darling, my poor little Stewart."

It was enough, she knew now ; her head sank lower and lower till it rested on the couch. She spoke no word, she uttered no sound, her grief was too intense. Once Mr. Glyndon tried to stretch out his hand towards her, but the movement caused him such exquisite pain, he was forced to desist.

"Stewart," he whispered ; she looked up, pale, but tearless—"where is your aunt?"

Mrs. Fenton came forward ; she had been standing near the window.

"The pain is getting worse," he said ; "she must not be here. Stewart, my poor little girl, kiss me."

She rose slowly to her feet, very still, very cold ; for one moment she gave way, and sinking back into her former position, covered his hands with passionate kisses ; the next, with a shuddering sigh, she bent over him and laid her cheek to his in a lingering embrace, then suffered her aunt to lead her from the room.

A few short hours and all was over. Only the lifeless form remained of the bright handsome father whom she had loved so well ! only a memory of his unfailing tenderness, and a grief which took many a long day to soften.

* * * *

There was a happy smile on Stewart Glyndon's face as she stood on the broad terrace in front of Chilton Manor and looked out across the vast expanse before her.

The house was built on a hill, and the garden sloped down for some distance, terminating in a small grove of pine trees, beyond which lay the sea, in all the quiescent beauty of a summer evening. To the right, and round the other side of the house, were more pine trees, rearing their stately heads in uncompromising severity to the sky above them. On the left, a breezy common stretched away, clad in gorgeous robes of purple heather and golden gorse, while far in the distance a small chain of hills might be faintly discerned.

The house itself was a modern one, replete with every comfort and every convenience. Its chief feature was the large square hall in the centre, often used as a sitting-room, and round which ran a quaint oak gallery, reached by a flight of broad, shallow

stairs. Several doors in this gallery led to various parts of the house.

There were many large and lofty rooms, too many, thought Mrs. Fenton, Stewart's widowed aunt, who had lived with and brought up her niece for the last eight years, ever since that sad day when her brother, Stewart's father, had been thrown from his horse and brought home unconscious. He rallied for a few hours, and Stewart never forgot her agony of sorrow when she realized she was alone in the world. Her mother she had never known, but between herself and her father had existed one of those intense affections sometimes met with between a man of the world and a child.

Mr. Glyndon had been a wealthy man, and at his death everything passed to his only child, so that Stewart was trebly devoted to Chilton Manor and its surroundings, in that it had been the chosen home of her father, her birthplace, and belonged to her entirely.

Under the firm, yet tender rule of her aunt, to whom she was devoted, Stewart had passed a very quiet and happy girlhood; and when, at nineteen, it had been thought advisable to take her to London for the season, her father's youngest sister, Lady Kemendyne, gladly undertook the chaperonage of her beautiful niece.

Stewart had enjoyed the whirl of gaiety while it lasted, though she came back unspoiled to declare that, after all, there was "no place like home."

That she was beautiful no one could deny. Tall and slight, she held herself as erect as one of her favourite pine trees. Her wavy hair shone in the sunlight like threads of gold, and her large grey eyes with their long lashes had not lost the trustful, innocent expression of childhood. Her features were somewhat irregular, but her chief charm lay in the expressiveness of her face, at times so bright and intelligent and full of vivacity, at others, so grave and reflective, with a depth of thought far beyond her years. Stewart's life had been a wonderfully shielded one, and her father had acted wisely when he left her to the care of his widowed and childless sister.

Mrs. Fenton was one of those women who rule without seeming to do so, and who imperceptibly draw out the best points of those with whom they come in contact. She had remained at

the manor during Stewart's absence, and the time had seemed long, though she would not for one moment have breathed a word which might lead to the curtailment of her niece's pleasure. Nevertheless she gladly welcomed her back, and realized how dreary the house had seemed without her bright and happy presence.

Stewart certainly thought the season had been a success. She had enjoyed everything to the full, it was all so new to her; nor had she been disillusioned. But Lady Kemendyne did not altogether consider the result as satisfactory as it might have been; there was an under-current of disappointment in her letter to Mrs. Fenton concerning Stewart's engagement to Basil Lamont, Lord Artington's younger son.

"With her face and fortune," she wrote, "she might have married *any one*, and she has only herself to blame that she is not the future Countess of Invery. However, I have done my best, and I must say that Mr. Lamont is a very rising young man. He is in the diplomatic service, and a great favourite with every one; still, she might have done better; but young people in these days are so determined to go their own way."

Stewart certainly did not think she could possibly have bettered herself in any way; she was perfectly satisfied, and full of the happiness that life held out to her. She had yielded herself and her love to one whom she felt was the ruler of her fate, and she was more than content with her choice.

And so on this August evening she stood looking seawards, and felt that life was a very good thing, even though it seemed the fashion to consider that it was not worth living. Her happy nature could not understand the luxury of imaginary woes, and her character was a curious combination of romance and common sense, often very disconcerting to her friends.

The day had been oppressively hot, but at sunset a soft refreshing breeze had sprung up, and out on the terrace, Stewart, lost in thought, seemed oblivious to the beauty of her surroundings. So absorbed was she that she failed to notice her aunt's approach.

"Dreaming, Stewart?"

The girl started, then smiled, and slipping her arm through Mrs. Fenton's, said:

"Let us go down to the edge of the cliffs; it will be cooler there, I think, and I want to talk to you."

They strolled slowly across the garden, and through the grove of pine trees until they reached the spot known as "The View," a rustic bench fixed between two tall pines not far from the edge and situated on a high point of land which jutted out into the water; below them lay the sea, its surface just lightly ruffled by the evening breeze.

They sat there in silence. After all, it did not seem as if Stewart were very anxious to begin her conversation. She leaned against the trunk of the tree; her hands, loosely clasped, lay in her lap, and her eyes, full of a quiet happiness, were fixed upon the distant horizon. Every now and then Mrs. Fenton looked at her somewhat wistfully; she was unwilling to disturb her, yet she too had something of which she must speak, and she felt there should be no delay.

At last Stewart turned towards her.

"How grave you look, Aunt Helen. I have been wondering if you will like Basil;" she blushed and smiled as she spoke, then continued:

"He writes that he is coming down here the day after to-morrow, and is most anxious to know you; he has often heard of your perfections from me, and he says he wants to verify them for himself," and she slid her hand affectionately into her aunt's.

"The day after to-morrow," exclaimed Mrs. Fenton. "Oh, not so soon!"

"Too soon, Aunt Helen? but I have been at home a fortnight. Of course," she added, feeling a little bit hurt, "if you don't wish him to come——"

"My dear child," interrupted her aunt, "you mistake me. As you know, I am most anxious to make Mr. Lamont's acquaintance; at the same time I ought to have told you——" she hesitated, then said abruptly: "Stewart, did you never wonder, or think it strange that your father left no paper of his wishes for your guidance, no word of any kind for you?"

Stewart looked at her in blank astonishment; how very extraordinary her aunt was this evening, she thought; then she shook her head.

"The idea did occur to me once or twice, but then it was all

so sudden, and nothing of the sort was found among his papers, or I should have had it. But why do you ask?"

"Because I have a packet for you from him."

"And you have kept it all these years! Oh, Aunt Helen, how could you?" She would have said more, but there was a repressive gravity about Mrs. Fenton which chilled her.

"You must not blame me," was the quiet reply; "your father wished it to be given to you only in the event of your being engaged before you were twenty-five."

"And if I had not become engaged?"

"You would not have had the packet."

"Do you know what it is about, Aunt Helen?"

"Yes."

"Why are you so grave? Is it something sad?"

"It will cause you some sorrow, dear; but I feel sure you have sufficient faith in your father's love for you to accept and act upon his wishes. But it is getting late; we had better go in." She rose as she spoke, for she had no wish to prolong the conversation.

Stewart rose too, but lingered behind, thoughtful and perplexed. The light had almost faded, the sea looked grey and sullen, and a thick mist rolling up added to the weirdness of the scene. The gentle splashing sound of the ripples on the sands below struck on her ears, as it had never done before, with a strange monotone of sadness. So are we "at one" with nature, so is nature "at one" with us, in all our moods, whether of joy or sorrow.

She shivered slightly as she turned away, then walked slowly home; but how different were her feelings now to what they had been a short while before, as she traversed the same path; then she had been full of happy thoughts for the future, now a foreboding sense of coming evil weighed on her mind. What could it mean?

Her aunt had reached the house before her, and Stewart, disinclined for further talk, went straight to her own room. A few minutes later there came a tap at the door, and Mrs. Fenton entered, carrying a thick square white packet. Stewart was standing by the window, and her hands shook as she silently took it, and the tears rose when her aunt kissed her lovingly and said:

"You will be brave, dear, I know."

Then she left her, and Stewart sank on her knees by the broad window seat, and gazed long at the superscription, written eight weary years ago.

"In the event of my death, this packet is to be given to my very dear daughter Stewart, should she be engaged to be married before the age of twenty-five; if not engaged when she has attained that age, it is to be burnt unread."

With trembling fingers she broke the seal. Inclosed was a smaller parcel, carefully fastened, even more so than the outer one; wrapped round it was a half sheet of paper, on which were these words:

"MY DARLING—I ask of you but two things; by the love you have for me, do not open the inclosed packet. When you are twenty-five, in the event of your being well and happy, I should wish you to burn it unread. Also, I do not know, when you read this, how near the age you may be, but I implore you not to let your marriage take place before you are twenty-five. You will trust me, dear child, as I trust you, and do not think hardly of your loving—FATHER."

Stewart read and re-read the paper before her, unable to realize fully what it meant.

"Twenty-five, twenty-five," she kept repeating dully; "why is it always twenty-five? But I am only twenty, and Basil . . . why, we were to be married next year . . . and now . . ." she clasped her hands before her—"we must wait five years! I cannot, father," she cried; "do not ask me; it is cruel . . . unkind!" She read the words again, and lingered over the last sentence. Her lips quivered; why must she not open the other packet and know the reason of it all? It seemed so hard, and yet, though she questioned and in her inmost heart rebelled, she never attempted to satisfy her curiosity. She would wait, and if her aunt could not, or would not help her, Basil would soon be with her, and she would be guided by him.

Through the long night she lay with wide-open eyes staring into the darkness, one moment grieving at the apparent tyranny

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of the request ; the next, certain that her father's great love only had prompted him to enforce it upon her.

The next morning Stewart laid the half-sheet before her aunt.

Mrs. Fenton looked at the girl's pale face, and her heart ached for her.

"Yes, dear," she said, "I know it seems hard."

"Do you know the contents of the inclosure?" asked Stewart, in a cold, lifeless manner.

"I do," was the reply, "and believe me, if I could do anything to help you in this matter, I would."

"Then you agree with my father in his cruel request?"

"Perfectly—but cruel!—oh, Stewart, if you knew."

"But I do not know, you see," she replied scornfully. "Perhaps if I had been treated more openly it might have been different ; as it is . . ." She stopped ; her pride forbade her to say more, and she hastily left the room.

Mrs. Fenton sighed ; the proud independent nature would suffer immeasurably, and she could do nothing ; she was bound by her promise to her dead brother.

That was a dreary day ; though bright and sunny as its predecessors had been, the hours dragged wearily along. Between Stewart and her aunt there was a barrier, which precluded any renewal of intercourse on the old affectionate terms. Poor Stewart ! she had been so happy, and now this cloud had risen, and the future seemed vague and uncertain. One hope remained to her : surely Basil would think as she did, and in that case . . . it seemed almost like treachery to her dead father even to contemplate the possibility of going against his wishes ; but five years, at her age, was almost a lifetime.

So she counted the hours to Basil's arrival, and the next afternoon drove down in her own little pony-cart to the station, some three miles off, to meet him.

Basil Lamont could not be called really handsome, but he was a striking-looking man. Very tall and broad-shouldered, the natural fairness of his complexion was enhanced by the darkness of his eyes and well-marked eyebrows, and his firmly-shaped mouth was partially hidden by a small moustache. There was a quiet well-bred ease in his manner, which amounted almost to nonchalance, but great force of character and determination lay

hidden under a careless exterior. With Stewart and Basil, so far, the course of true love had run smoothly enough ; they had met at the beginning of the season ; no real obstacles had been placed in their way, though Lady Kemendyne had tried, but ineffectually, to repress the growing intimacy ; and in the end she was obliged to resign herself to circumstances, and admit that, if her niece had not fulfilled her expectations, she really had nothing much to complain of.

And so, as they drove slowly home along the lanes between hedges covered with honeysuckle and "old man's beard," then in flower, they were full of a deep happiness: Basil without a thought of anything but the intense enjoyment of the present moment, Stewart happy too, but subdued by a sorrow that threatened them both. However, she put it aside for the time being, for she had much to hear and to relate.

Afternoon tea was ready and waiting for them under the big tree on the lawn ; there Mrs. Fenton joined them, and for the first time met Basil. That she was prepossessed in his favour Stewart soon saw, and she felt softened. A faint hope rose within her that perhaps, after all, her aunt might in the end change her mind, and explain the meaning of the mystery ; so she exerted herself to be merry and loving as she used to be, and the afternoon passed much more swiftly and happily than she had dared to hope.

It had been her great fear that Basil should discover anything was amiss before she could tell him all, for she knew that, quiet as he was, nothing escaped his observation. And yet, as time went on, was it a kind of foreboding that made her decide to say nothing for the present, but determine to enjoy every hour to the full ? Who can tell ?

The days slipped by, and many a time Stewart longed for, yet almost dreaded, the moment when she should show Basil her father's letter, and ask his advice. At first she had been certain he would feel with her, that such a demand was uncalled for and arbitrary, while the reasons for making it were not divulged. But now she hesitated, and yet blamed herself for so doing. Why should she be afraid ? She would make up her mind and get it over. Basil had been with her a fortnight, and in another three days he was going to Scotland for some shooting. Only that afternoon he had been asking her to fix the beginning of the

year for the wedding, and to his surprise she had turned the subject somewhat abruptly. But this evening—yes, it would be best ; and taking the letter from her desk and putting it in her pocket, she went down the broad staircase just as the gong sounded. Basil was the only occupant of the hall, and he came to meet her with a smile. She put her hand on his arm.

"Basil," she said softly, "after dinner I want you to come to the View with me ; I have something to tell you."

He looked at her quickly, her manner and tone struck him as rather unusual.

"Something serious, dear ?" he asked.

"Yes ; I want your help and your advice. I know I can rely on you."

"I think you can," he said gravely, and taking her hand in his he slipped it under his arm and held it fast, giving it now and then a reassuring pat, as they followed Mrs. Fenton to the dining-room. The meal was rather a quiet one, and the conversation was kept up chiefly between Mrs. Fenton and Basil ; both noticed that Stewart was unusually depressed, and her aunt looked at her wistfully now and then ; she surmised only too well what was troubling her, for she knew that as yet Stewart had not spoken to Basil.

"What are you going to do this evening ?" she asked, as they rose from the table.

"We are going down to the View for a chat," was the reply ; "it is quite early, only half-past eight o'clock, and Thompson says there will be a moon to-night. I should like Basil to see how beautiful it is here in the moonlight."

"Very well, dear ; I have a book I want particularly to finish this evening, and shall not go further than the terrace."

So they dispersed, Mrs. Fenton to her comfortable garden chair and the third volume of an exciting novel ; the other two passed down across the lawn and on through the pine trees, whose delicious scent hung heavy on the evening air.

The last touches of the setting sun were crimsoning the quiet waters and glancing athwart the burnt-sienna coloured trunks of the pines, lighting them up in vivid contrast to their dusky branches. There was a stillness and repose in the very air which was soothing, and with a sigh Stewart turned to her companion.

"Basil, when you asked me to fix the time of our wedding, I did not answer, and this is the reason why." She drew the letter from her pocket and gave it to him. He read it, then looked at her bewildered.

"But this is absurd, Stewart ; what does it mean ?"

She shook her head.

"I do not know, I cannot understand, and my aunt will not explain ; she only implores me to abide by his wishes."

"You have the packet that is mentioned ?"

"Yes, but of course I have not opened it. Oh, Basil, it seems so hard !"

"Hard !" he exclaimed impetuously ; "it is most cruel ; but we will see what can be done. Only trust me, dear."

He put his arm round her, and saw her eyes were full of tears.

"Have you felt it so much ?" he whispered.

"It has been a nightmare to me," she sobbed, "ever since I knew that it could not be for so long."

"But it shall be," was the reply ; "in these days such arbitrariness is impossible. Listen, darling ; I will go and ask your aunt the reason ; perhaps she will tell me." He rose as he spoke. "Now wait here for me," he bent over and kissed her ; "say that you trust me."

"I trust you implicitly," she said simply ; "but I have a feeling . . . a presentiment——"

"That all will be well," he interrupted, and he turned away and left her sitting there, sitting pale and fair in the gathering twilight, full of a coming sorrow, of an inexplicable weight of misery. She looked at the view before her with wide unseeing eyes ; the intense quietude oppressed her, and she shivered slightly. The darkness deepened, the sleepy twittering of the birds in the branches overhead had long since ceased, and yet he did not come. One by one the stars came out and the moon rose in the sky, and still she sat immovable, a dull despair making her almost insensible to the flight of time.

At length a sound of footsteps roused her ; slowly they drew nearer, and through the trees she saw Basil, but not the same Basil who had left her. Then he had been full of energy and decision, now he approached as the bearer of bad news. She went swiftly to meet him ; one look was enough, she stood still, then covered her face with her hands.

He put his arms round her.

"My darling, be brave; we must submit."

"You too; oh, Basil!"

"Stewart, you said you would trust me; look at me, dear. God knows it is hard to bear; do not make it worse for me."

She looked up, and in his earnest eyes fixed upon her, she saw a world of grief.

"Tell me," she pleaded, "tell me what it is."

But he only shook his head.

"Do not ask me; I have promised."

She broke from him and stood speechless for a moment, then a harsh discordant laugh rang out in the stillness.

"If you repent of your choice, say so," she cried; "you need not wait five years to find it out!"

He looked at her steadily.

"Stewart, you do not mean what you are saying; you are overwrought. Oh, my darling, where is your faith?"

There was a curious drawn look in her face; she passed her hand wearily across her forehead as though dazed.

"What was it? did some one laugh? Take me home, Basil; I am so tired."

He led her back to the house, where Mrs. Fenton was anxiously waiting: she saw the shock had been great, and without a word she took her to her room, and never left her until she had sunk into a deep sleep.

Meanwhile Basil, too restless to sit still, paced backwards and forwards in an agony of apprehension. The memory of that terrible laugh made him shudder. How would it all end? he asked himself; how could he bear the burden for five long years? But he could find no answer.

From that night there was a great change in Stewart; she was just as loving as before, but the spontaneous gaiety and general brightness which had been amongst her chief charms were no longer there. A listlessness and apathy had taken possession of her, and she did not attempt to shake them off. She felt as if the world were combining to fight against her and ruin her happiness, and a feeling of suspicion was awakened in her.

Basil was gone, but had promised to come down again in six weeks' time, and after that, Stewart was to go and stay with

his people in Wales, so they would not be separated for very long.

The summer days dragged by, and Stewart spent them under the trees, doing nothing ; a book would lie open on her knee, but she rarely, if ever, turned the pages. In vain her aunt coaxed and entreated her to occupy herself, she could make no impression ; the girl's nature seemed totally changed ; and at last she decided that it would be wiser to take Stewart away, hoping that change of scene would in some degree alter the current of her thoughts. She broached the subject, and Stewart acquiesced, but without any apparent pleasure ; she said it did not matter to her where she went or what she did. So Mrs. Fenton wrote to Lady Kemendyne, and asked her to come down and talk the matter over. She came, and was shocked at the alteration in her niece's appearance.

"This will never do, Helen," she exclaimed. "Remember her poor mother ; we must keep her bright and happy until she is twenty-five."

Stewart entered the room as the last words were uttered ; her face flushed, and she turned and went out hurriedly.

Always that fatal time ! always twenty-five ! what could it mean ? Perhaps the fact that she had within her reach the key to the mystery made it more difficult to bear. There was a constant struggle going on—the longing, the insatiable craving to know the worst, whatever it might be, and the reluctance to act directly against her father's express wishes. This struggle was wearing her out, both bodily and mentally. Many a time she unlocked her desk, took out the little sealed packet and looked at it, then put it back. Her aunt had offered to take charge of it, but she had declined to part with it ; there was a fascination about so small a thing, with such power to control her destiny.

Mrs. Fenton often wondered at her brother's act in leaving the knowledge he wished withheld in his daughter's care. But Mr. Glyndon had done it on purpose, as a trial of his child's love and faith, and he had felt sure that a character which could successfully resist such a temptation would only be benefited by having been put to the test.

Occasionally Stewart would, to a certain extent, throw off her depression and be merry like old times, but the change never lasted long, and was always succeeded by a deeper gloom.

At last it was decided that they should go abroad, and the day before their departure Stewart went down to her favourite seat, a spot fraught with memories both sad and sweet.

As she sat there, many thoughts came crowding upon her mind, thoughts sad and rebellious. Until the last two months, she had never known a moment's sorrow, save that great grief of eight years ago; and now, life seemed terribly hard. That her trial need only be for a few years did not make it any easier to bear.

She had thought over it so much that she could think no longer; she became wearied and confused; it was like arguing in a circle, she always came back to the same question—"Why?"

It was getting late in the afternoon, and the sun was beginning to lose some of its force. It was Sunday, and far in the distance Stewart could hear the faint echo of pealing bells borne upon the breeze; presently they ceased, and the all-prevailing calm seemed to enfold her. She looked round quickly once or twice, as though she felt an unseen presence near her; but she was alone. There was no sound or sign of life save the hum of the bees as they hovered from one purple heather bell to another, or the chirruping of the swallows as they glanced swiftly backwards and forwards through the clear air.

She drew out the packet and looked at it. Her mind was in a state of chaos; from thinking so much on one subject, her judgment had become warped. Her heart beat fast, there was a mist before her eyes; she hesitated, and half rose, as if to escape from her thoughts. It was a moment fraught with deadly peril; there was a fierce but brief struggle, she wavered . . . and fell . . . with trembling fingers, as in a dream, she broke the seals! It was done! Before her lay several closely-written sheets in her father's handwriting. The tender words with which the letter began brought the tears to her eyes. She read on. Once she raised her head, a look of horror on her face, but only for a moment; she bent again over the fatal narrative. The sun sank in the west, but she heeded it not, she was absorbed. Now and then a sob escaped her, but still she read on. The twilight grew deeper, the silence greater. At last it was finished. She sat motionless, frozen, petrified with an agony too great for words. "Was this to be her fate? Ah, no! it could not be!" She

rose, and the papers fluttered to her feet ; her white lips moved, but no sound issued from them ; stricken, despairing, she stretched her arms towards the sky : " Not this, oh, not this ! " she whispered ; " anything but this ! " She waited : but through the stillness came no word of hope. Her arms dropped and she sank down by the seat. Mechanically she gathered together the scattered sheets of paper, and endeavoured to fasten them up as they had been before, but she could not. She leaned her head against the tree and closed her eyes—if death would only come !

" Dear God," she moaned, " must I suffer so ? Must I go on living ? May I not die, here and now ? It is not only for myself that I pray—but he too—my beloved."

But the night gave back no answer, nor was there any to comfort her. As the moments passed, her agony grew more intense ; she could have shrieked aloud with anguish. She sprang to her feet, seized with a nameless terror ; the air seemed full of malign influences which pressed round her ; she tried to beat them off, but they drew nearer and nearer. There she stood, unable to move, her face white and drawn with a deepening fear ; then suddenly, with a long low wail of anguish, she fell senseless to the ground, a merciful oblivion blotting out the terrible grief of the present, the dread of the future.

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Two hours later they found her, sitting, singing softly to herself, a vacant smile on her beautiful face.

" Twenty-five, twenty-five," she kept repeating. " I shall be twenty-five soon, Aunt Helen ; when will Basil be here ? "

They saw at once what had happened, and the sheets of paper on the ground told their own tale ; they took her home and cared for her, but they could not restore her reason ; that had escaped for ever. Basil came once to see her, but his presence disturbed her and made her restless ; he was broken-hearted at the terrible change. She was quite quiet and happy ; sometimes she would look at her aunt with a puzzled, half-wistful expression, and ask why the word " twenty-five " always rang in her ears.

" I see it written all round me," she would say ; " it is carried to me on the wind, and the leaves whisper it as I pass ; even the birds sing it over and over again."

But her aunt could only soothe her and hope that time, the great healer, might perhaps "minister to the mind diseased." She never recovered, though she lived for many years; the life that had been so full of gladness was darkened for ever!

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The London season was at its height, and the crush at Mrs. Rollestone's "At home" proportionately great, for she was a popular hostess, and her entertainments were renowned for splendour and originality. Two people were talking, when one of them suddenly exclaimed:

"There is Lady Kemendyne; I must go and ask her why her beautiful niece, Miss Glyndon, is not with her. I suppose that marriage will come off shortly, if it has not done so already."

"Have you not heard," said his companion, "the terrible story?"

"No, what story? I have been away all the winter, and only came back a few weeks ago, as you know," and he looked meaningly at the fair face beside him. She turned her head aside and began speaking quickly.

"Poor Stewart Glyndon is hopelessly insane, and I hear that for the last eighteen years her mother has had to be taken care of. It is very sad. Her father married abroad a Frenchwoman, a de Seaumé, and it appears that the members of that family very often go mad between the ages of twenty and twenty-five; if they escape until the latter age, they are safe. Mr. Glyndon did not know this before he married his wife, and the shock was great when, at twenty-three, Mrs. Glyndon became suddenly morbid and depressed, and soon after had to be removed from her home, leaving him with a little child of two years old. He felt it dreadfully, and, I believe, left instructions that his daughter was not to marry before the age of twenty-five. I never heard the exact facts of the case, but I fancy Miss Glyndon got hold of some papers of her father's, and found out the whole story, and it proved too much for her. Lady Kemendyne was more than cut up about it, and I think they were very much to blame in letting her get at any papers at all; they might have known that most likely such knowledge would be disastrous."

"And Lamont, what of him?"

"He is a changed man, and will never be the same again; you

know he is very quiet, and I should imagine his feelings were very deep, only I know it is rather depressing to see him always so taciturn and gloomy; but as I have never experienced a tremendous shock myself, perhaps I am not competent to give an opinion,' and the speaker dismissed the subject with a little laugh.

It was a tragedy which had just ruffled the surface of society for a day or two, and then was buried in oblivion.

Life is so short, why dwell on that which is painful? Why harrow one's feelings with troubles which do not touch us nearly? Why indeed? Rather "let us eat, drink and be merry, for to-morrow we die"—so say the many.

A Girl's Folly.

By ANNIE THOMAS (MRS. PENDER CUDLIP),
Author of "DENIS DONNE," "UTTERLY MISTAKEN," "THE
HONBLE. JANE," etc., etc.

CHAPTER XI.

WARNINGS.

WHEN Ann was released from inspection, instead of going back at once to Blessington Terrace and promptly relieving the anxious minds of her old and young mistress by the proud declaration that her innocence had been unquestionably proved, she made her way in an omnibus to Mrs. Ogilvie's house, where, as she had anticipated at that hour, she found the mistress of it dozing in her bedroom.

She had knocked lightly at the bedroom door, and receiving no response, she opened it less noiselessly than she would have done had she not been labouring under a smarting sense of being a fool for her pains in being there at all.

Mrs. Ogilvie, roused more abruptly from her doze than seemed well to her, gazed at the intruder calmly for a few moments embarrassingly. Then even more embarrassingly she asked :

"Why are you here at this time of day, Ann? You have an easy place indeed and a kind mistress to give you so many afternoons out as you have been having lately."

"A kind mistress indeed!" Ann said, and snorted defiantly.

"A kind and *confiding* mistress," Mrs. Ogilvie said calmly. "I hope you won't give me any cause to regret that I recommended you to her, Ann."

Ann laughed ferociously. The quiet, well-to-do, irreproachable old lady, in the arm-chair by the window was an irritating spectacle to the excited, aggrieved female, who had just been found not guilty of stealing a sapphire and diamond ring.

"It's I that have cause to regret your having recommended me to the place, Mrs. Ogilvie—though why I should call you *Mrs.* Ogilvie and you call me mere 'Ann' passes me, as we are cousins. I have been dragged through the streets like a common thief by a constable to-day, and that insulted and worried,

that I wonder I've borne up through it all. Is Dick at home? I want to let him know what I have been led into for his sake."

"Mr. Ogilvie is not here to-day," Dick's mother said coldly. She had been happy to help this less prosperous relation of hers to a respectable occupation in a reputable home. But when the woman forgot herself, and spoke of Mrs. Ogilvie's son as "Dick!" then it was time to take this poor relation (the genus have proverbially hard mouths) on the curb.

Ann plumped down into a chair opposite to the one occupied by her ungracious hostess. She loosened her bonnet strings and cloak, and tried her best to look as if she were feeling at home and comfortable.

"Whether we call him 'Dick' or 'Mr. Ogilvie' doesn't much matter. I am here on his business to-day, and if he is to be seen you had better let me see him—for his sake!" she said, with a poor attempt at being at her ease, which only resulted in a supplicatory air, for which she could have slapped her own face.

Old Mrs. Ogilvie looked her inopportune relation steadily in the face. That dark, swarthy face was deeply flushed now with fatigue, annoyance, indigestion (she had missed her dinner), vindictiveness, and one or two other unbecoming emotions.

"You seem upset about something, and are rambling in your talk, Ann. Why have you been 'dragged through the streets like a common thief?' and why do you want to speak to my son about it?"

Then Ann, to use her own expression, "up and told the whole story."

Without a word of comment, Mrs. Ogilvie rose from her chair as soon as Ann had finished her recital.

"I must go down and give my ladies their tea, so I will say good afternoon to you, Ann," she said coldly, as she advanced to the door and held it wide open. Then as her guest made her exit from the room slowly, she added:

"And I will tell you now what I have thought for a long time and that is, that it would be more becoming for a woman of your years to give her time and labour to doing her duty by her employers and laying up a little nest-egg for her old age, than to be wasting both in running after a young man who does not thank you for your trouble, nor want you to take it. You are old enough to be my son's mother, and there is not a young girl

among the *many he makes love* to, who makes herself such a silly fool as you do about him. I'm his mother, and I know."

Ann stood aghast for a moment. She had always vainly imagined that her overtures had been accepted by Mrs. Ogilvie, as made to herself, not to her son.

"I've always come to you as a humble friend and relation who owes you much should come, Mrs. Ogilvie. Why you should throw Dick—your son, I mean—in my face at this time of day, I don't know. I've been fond of him and kind to him to the best of my power for many a long year——."

"Yes, since he was a lad of sixteen, and you a woman of thirty-six fell in love with him," Mrs. Ogilvie interrupted scornfully. "I am ashamed to say it of one who is a blood relation after all, but you are an old fool, Ann, and my son thinks you one."

"He tells you so? He says that of me?"

"Well, no; he does not *say* it, if it comes to that," Mrs. Ogilvie answered veraciously.

"But he thinks it and looks it, you mean?"

"Now what does it matter to you what he thinks and looks?" Mrs. Ogilvie said equably. "You are a lone, elderly woman who ought to give all your time and thought to providing for yourself in your old age, which is not far off. Thoughts of young men, such as you have, are not becoming at *our* age, Ann."

"I'm younger than you in years," Ann said sulkily. She would have said something much sharper, had she not been restrained by the feeling that this was the only place in which she might ever hope to meet Dick, and that if she gave his mother an excuse for declining to receive her there again, that one poor chance would be lost. Accordingly she "kept a civil tongue in her head," as she told herself, and was rewarded for the effort by Mrs. Ogilvie saying:

"Yes, you are—but you don't look it; you never did, you know, Ann. Step into the back room and have a cup of tea. What time have you to be home?"

Ann wagged her head angrily, but mutely accepted the invitation by following Mrs. Ogilvie into the back room.

"My time's my own till half past seven, then I have to dress Miss Sylvia. Mrs. Gould makes a rare fuss about Miss Sylvia, now that she is going to marry that rich old fella'."

"I wish Dick could forget Miss Sylvia," Dick's mother said with a heavy sigh, considerably.

"Forget her!" Ann snapped; she was stirring up the sugar in a steaming hot cup of tea by this time, and until she had consumed it she knew she was safe in Mrs. Ogilvie's hospitable hands. "Forget her! He hasn't been remembering her very much lately. It's months and months since he asked me to get him a word with her. You needn't trouble about *her*—besides, she's going to be married, and that shows she doesn't think of him any longer."

"Is your tea quite sweet and to your liking, Ann?" Mrs. Ogilvie asked suavely.

"It's beautiful; but I'm not thinking of my tea!—I'm thinking," with a sudden burst of impotent anger, "that it would be better for all of us if you would get Dick to see me for a few minutes. I know he's in London, for I saw him outside our house talking to Miss Warrenner this morning."

"Will you have some more bread-and-butter, or will you try this cake, Ann? My ladies like it better than any bought ones. I make it myself. I will give you the proportions if you like to try it. For sixpence, making it with margarine, I make a cake that my ladies like better than what they pay a shilling for at Buzzard's."

"Your cake will choke me till you answer me—*when* can I see Dick? *When* can I see him? It's for *his* sake."

Mrs. Ogilvie drew her massive gold watch slowly from its sanctuary, and consulted it deliberately before she replied:

"If you go at once and catch an omnibus, you will be home just in time to dress Miss Sylvia. I don't expect my son home for an hour or more; then he will be busy dressing to go to a smoking concert. Gentlemen have engagements that you must not think of interfering with, Ann—though you are an old cousin of his mother's."

Having no reasonable grounds for staying after this, Ann went. But she went with a grim sense of injustice being meted out to her by the Ogilvie family, and an even grimmer conviction that the son was as anxious now to shake her off as the mother had been for some time.

"Gentlemen have engagements that I mustn't think of interfering with,' have they?" she muttered to herself as she trudged

up to Oxford Street to catch the omnibus, "and gentlemen must be well dressed to keep those engagements, but some of them are not very particular where the money comes from to buy their swell evening clothes and studs. Oh! Ann Johnson! Ann Johnson! you've been a fool to keep yourself in dowdy old-fashioned gowns that *Mr. Ogilvie* wouldn't be seen walking with for the sake of——! lor! there's my 'bus a-crowded on top, and so stuffy inside that I shan't be cool enough to handle Miss Sylvia's hair when I get home. 'Gentlemen' have engagements that I mustn't interfere with, have they? You may 'whistle' as much as you like to me after this, but I won't come to you, my lad. But there! Why should I spite him, poor fellow, because his mother's that hard and selfish that she wants to keep him all to herself? 'Gentlemen,' indeed! It's my belief that though he may be a gentleman's son, his mother was never that gentleman's wife!" The reflection that there might be some truth in this last conjecture quite calmed and soothed her, and by the time she arrived in Blessington Terrace, her hands were quite cool enough to dress Miss Sylvia's hair, and she had entirely forgiven Dick Ogilvie for having been called a gentleman by his mother.

Sylvia was unusually solemn when Ann came into the room and began making preparations for helping her young mistress to fulfil her *toilette* duties. Things had come to an awkward pass that day about the confidential servant, for Mr. Christopher had confided to Lily that his suspicions of her having stolen Sylvia's ring were by no means allayed by the fact of the working jeweller of Combermere Street having failed to identify her as the person who had sold it to him. Moreover he had added:

"I must say that, without having any desire to be masterful or to exert undue influence over Sylvia's opinions or actions, I cannot approve of the way in which she stands up for and vindicates the woman. It is the same about those horrible dogs, which I hate and detest. I would give her a beautiful thoroughbred Blenheim or King Charles spaniel, an Italian greyhound, or a pug. But she refuses my offer, and clings to these bull-terriers, which are not at all suitable for ladies' pets. They have bad tempers too; on principle, I am averse to keeping bad-tempered dogs about a house. I just pushed one with my foot yesterday, and the brute showed his teeth and growled at me."

Lily laughed and told him:

"It's lucky for you that Sylvia didn't see you push one of her pets with your foot ; she would have shown her teeth and growled at you too if she had. She won't have a harsh word or deed given or done to Dick Ogilvie's dogs."

Mr. Christopher writhed through every fibre of the loose, superfluous flesh which encumbered his bulky frame.

"Your mother doesn't allow this man to visit at her house, does she?"

"I don't know about mamma not allowing it ; at any rate, he never comes here. I suppose even Sylvia felt that it was better to drop his acquaintance when she ceased to board with his mother. You know mamma is never severe ; she just makes us feel that it will be better for us in the end—pleasanter in every way—if she influences us quietly. We get more outings and amusements and new frocks if she is pleased, so we do let her influence us quietly."

"It's astonishing that she should permit Sylvia to retain those dogs," Mr. Christopher observed testily.

Lily smiled seraphically as she replied :

"Mamma doesn't want to have any ructions during Sylvia's last days at home ; she knows you will settle those dogs as soon as you're married, and she would rather you bore the storm of Sylvia's wrath than let it burst upon us. Do you know I really pity you when you have to do battle with Sylvia to oust Bubble and Squeak. I think if I were you, I would rather endure the dogs than make her so unhappy and ferocious as she will be when you tell her to get rid of them."

"Would you do battle against the wishes of the man you married for the sake of a couple of curs?"

"They're not curs," Lily said with magnanimous truthfulness ; "they're very highly bred. Dick Ogilvie gave Sylvia their pedigree and paid enormous sums for them, I believe. They're not curs ; Dick knew Sylvia too well to give her anything that wasn't thoroughbred."

"How the—how on earth did the scamp become so well acquainted with her tastes?" he fumed, and Lily told him pleasantly :

"They were the only young people in the house all those months that Sylvia lived there, and gay youth loves gay youth, you know."

"Of course, of course," he said hurriedly ; "she formed these

pernicious associations with boarding-house keepers and bull-terriers when she was a child, a mere child. Since then she has shown more discrimination ; I don't anticipate having the slightest trouble in moulding Sylvia to my wishes."

"I'm so glad you don't ; it's always such a pity to anticipate trouble," Lily said sweetly, and again Mr. Christopher thought what a charming sister-in-law he would have, and how admirably emeralds and sapphires, and indeed any precious stones became her. He quite wished that he had not liked Sylvia best when he threw the handkerchief, and began to feel that he had acted like an impetuous youth in having made his selection with such undue haste.

CHAPTER XII.

A FAMILY LIKENESS.

THE singing, smoking and drinking, the excitement he went through, and the flattery he received on account of the irreproachable way in which he rendered "My Old Dutch," &c., had no ill effects on the head or general physique of "Our Mr. Ogilvie." That gentleman was on the road at an early hour the next day, driving a fine sixteen hand high bay mare, who inherited her slinging, showy, ground-covering trot from "The Swell"—the sire of many a Grand National and Derby winner—and her staying power and apparently inexhaustible strength from a native born and bred Dartmoor mare.

It was not the day of the month on which it was laid down that he should "take the round" which embraced Prior Common. But he determined on taking it this day and on calling in at Dene Prior, looking up the Rectory people and seeing what Belle Warrener's father was like.

It was characteristic of the vein of happy audacity which ran through his nature that he thought of the young lady who so unmistakably looked down upon him now as "Belle Warrener." She had not scorned or patronized, snubbed or tried to humiliate him in those dilapidated days when he had played the tramp, partly from necessity and a great deal from choice and a love of mystifying amusement. But she had both scorned and snubbed him when he had intercepted her in his smartest, best Bond Street habiliments and endeavoured to coerce her into gaining him those few words with Sylvia Gould for which the passionate portion of his nature pined.

During his previous visits under various guises to the neighbourhood of Dene Prior, he had learnt that the young squire's father had changed his name from Ogilvie to Stanmer for the property. He had not thought much of this at the time, Ogilvie was not an uncommon name; so although he bore it, and though his mother had always impressed upon him that he was the son of a well-born man, it was only within the last few weeks that he had begun to conjure up the possibility of being a scion of the Dene Prior house.

"Supposing the old Johnnie who changed his name to Stanmer turns out to be my uncle?—or anyway a cousin of sorts of my father's, that bounder who knocked me down for kissing Belle Warrenner will be sorry for having treated his blood-relation like a common vagabond," Dick Ogilvie thought smilingly as he drew up at a side door, and as he did so it opened and two ladies stepped out into the sunlight.

"The old dow. and her daughter, I suppose. Jove! I didn't think the tow-haired squire would have such a lovely sister," he thought, with a dark crisp-haired man's contempt for soft, silky chestnut locks on a masculine head. Then he lifted his deer-stalker from his head with a stiff, courteous, deferential air that reminded Mrs. Stanmer startingly of—some one who had been very dear to her, and of whom she was angry with herself for thinking for an instant in connection with this smart gentleman of the road.

She was passing on with the faintest inclination of the head when he sprang to the ground and stepped up to her.

"Mrs. Stanmer, I presume?" he said, stealing one brilliant look of intense admiration at Rose Davenport as he spoke.

"I am Mrs. Stanmer."

He presented his business-card and raised his cap again, and again Mrs. Stanmer's memory jogged her unpleasantly.

"My son, Mr. Stanmer, is not at home, and indeed if he were, your business is less with him than with the butler," she said with some asperity as she noticed that his card stated him to be an agent for stout and ales as well as for rare foreign vintages.

He laughed good-humouredly—*what* an infectiously merry, good-humoured laugh it was—and replied:

"I always prefer going to headquarters—never deal with the man when I can deal with his master. I ought to have guessed, though, that your son would not be at home this morning. We

kept it up rather late last night at the Ramblers', and he is not like me: I dare not have any to-morrow mornings."

The tone of familiarity, the implication that this man! this tradesman's traveller! had been mixing on terms of equality with Arthur the previous night would have been sufficient of itself to give Mrs. Stanmer an attack of mental prickly heat. But above and beyond the intense irritation caused by his manner and his words was the scalding, smarting sense of having intimately known "some one" who closely resembled him. How could he dare to be like any one whom she had ever known intimately? With less languor than ordinarily characterized her manner—in fact, rather curtly—she again referred him to the butler, and was enjoying the proud consciousness of "having put him in his proper place" when Rose marred that enjoyment by saying:

"What a distinguished-looking man! He's like Mr. Stanmer grown older, darker and stronger. What a good name too—Ogilvie," she continued, as she took the card from Mrs. Stanmer's hand.

"Probably it's merely an assumed name. Don't look back, Rose. These people who come soliciting orders for things one does not want are the pests of country life. I hope Marcroft"—Marcroft was the butler—"will get rid of him and desire him not to call again. There is something about the man's appearance that I don't like at all."

"How odd! Now there is something about his appearance that I like very much indeed," Rose said provokingly.

"That is because you see a fancied resemblance to Arthur in him."

"Indeed no. It's the something in him which does not resemble Mr. Stanmer that attracts me. There are some people one can't help speculating about," the girl went on in her stately, meditative way. "I am afraid it is vulgar curiosity, but I can't help wondering what that man's home and surroundings are like. If he has a wife, is she common-place? and does she see to his dinners and make him comfortable? I should think he would get very tired of a wife who was common-place and 'saw to his dinners' and made him 'comfortable,' shouldn't you?"

"It's the aim and object for which men of that class marry."

"Of what class?" Rose asked innocently.

"The class of—of bagmen, I think they are called." Mrs.

Stanmer spoke with fine scorn, but Rose Davenport was not confused, far less crushed by it.

"I think I should like to know more of men of that class, if many of them are like him." She tossed her head backwards in the direction of the side door, where Ogilvie's smart mare and dog-cart still stood. "They must be much more interesting than men of the class I meet at home."

"Don't speak disparagingly of your own caste, my dear."

"I don't want to disparage it—the fault is in me. I am sure that I don't find it interesting."

Mrs. Stanmer roused herself to remonstrate with this developing radical.

"Men of the class to which this Mr. Ogilvie (as he calls himself) belongs are the *employés* of the City merchant princes whom you profess to find uninteresting."

"Are they really?"

"Why, of course they are, child." The great lady of Dene Prior was waxing impatient. "And—I am sorry that he reminds you of Arthur ever so slightly, for I think he is exceedingly bad style."

"I know a gentleman when I see one," Rose said quietly.

"You are not going to try and annoy me by pretending to think this man is one?"

"I am not pretending, and I am sorry that my genuine opinion annoys you; but whoever he is, and however he has been brought up, and whatever his occupation may be, he comes from a racing stable. I have never made a mistake about either a man's or a horse's breeding yet," the young lady said with perfect politeness but equal resolution.

They had reached the lawn and seated themselves under a copper-beech tree, from which position the obnoxious stranger at the side door was invisible. Still Mrs. Stanmer fretted under the knowledge that he was still there, "wasting Marcroft's time," she told herself angrily. This knowledge, and the fact of his name being Ogilvie and of his bearing a certain resemblance to Arthur, which she could not help seeing, though she denied it even to herself, irritated and unnerved her.

"I hope Marcroft is not gossiping to that man about the family," she said presently in her most autocratic tone.

"Why should he not? There is nothing about the family to be ashamed of, I'm sure."

"Certainly there is not; but I always distrust travellers and tramps and all unauthenticated visitors. I am told that the reason there are so many successful burglaries carried on is, that servants are led on to give information to these casual people as to where the plate and jewellery are kept."

"Burglars would have a fine haul at Dene Prior! I could almost burgle myself for the sake of that gold plate," Rose said carelessly. Then both ladies opened the volumes they had brought out with them, and followed the fortunes respectively of Mrs. Clifford's "Aunt Ann," and the buoyant spirits who trip it so lightly through the pages of Florence Marryat's "There is no Death."

While they were improving the time in this way, Dick Ogilvie was spending his pleasantly enough, though, perhaps, unprofitably for his employers. He could not screw an order even for a cask of ale out of the butler, who declared he "couldn't take the responsibility of opening an account with new tradesmen in his master's absence." Dick Ogilvie swallowed his disgust at being called a tradesman, tipped Mr. Marcroft with a sovereign, and then gracefully drifted into a desultory conversation concerning the beauties of the place.

"Fact is, I take an interest in Dene Prior on account of the Ogilvies," he said. "The late man here changed his name from Ogilvie to Stanmer, I find. I think he must have been a cousin of my father's."

"The old master hadn't any cousins that I ever heard of," Marcroft said chillingly. "He came into this property through his mother; she was a Miss Stanmer, and when her brother died childless, her son, Mr. Arthur Ogilvie, was the next of kin, and came into Dene Prior, with only the trouble of changing his name to Stanmer for it."

Dick's dark handsome face grew suddenly alight with a brilliant sanguine suspicion that he might be nearer of kin to the late owner of Dene Prior than he had hitherto dreamed of being.

"Arthur is a favourite name in the Ogilvie family," he said carelessly. "Have you any Ogilvie portraits here? I don't care about the Stanmers."

"There are portraits of the late master, his father and mother—she that was Miss Stanmer—and his grandfather. If you would like to see them, sir, I will ring the stable-yard bell for your horse to be put up for half-an-hour."

"Thanks, I should," Dick said, and unconsciously he assumed the air of having a right to see the portraits, which impressed Marcroft and made the latter wish that he had not used the word "tradesman" just now.

"Mrs. Stanmer won't come in till the luncheon bell rings, so, though the Ogilvie portraits are in the oak room, where she always sits of a morning, I can show them to you."

For a moment Dick hesitated before crossing the threshold. A sudden repulsion to entering Dene Prior by the side door had seized him. Something told him that he ought not to enter that house in that way.

"By Jove! I don't think I ought to go and spy at the family portraits in your master's absence," he said abruptly, and Marcroft was reminded vaguely by the imperious abrupt manner of some one he had known and probably served, but at the moment he could not put either a name or a date to that "some one."

"Pray don't have any scruples about it, sir," the butler said more obsequiously than he had yet spoken. Then forgetfully he added, "I have permission to show a part of the house, when the doing so doesn't interfere with the privacy of the family. This morning, Mr. Stanmer being still in town and Mrs. Stanmer on the lawn until luncheon, I can show you the oak room."

Dick Ogilvie laughed in a dissatisfied, strained way, stepped across the threshold of the side door and was following his guide, when looking back he saw a stableman roughly chucking at the mouth of his quivering mare.

In an instant he was back in the doorway.

"D——n you! drop her!" he called out furiously. "Does your master let you play the devil with *his* horses' mouths? At any rate you shan't with mine."

He lowered his loud angry tone on the last words, for round the corner of the house came swiftly the handsome girl who a few moments before had been reading on the lawn. She smiled as she saw his embarrassment at having been heard using intemperate language by her. His embarrassment increased when she took the reins gently but very firmly from the groom's hands, and with the words, "Go back to your work, Jones; Mr. Ogilvie and I will take the mare round. Pray forgive me for interfering," she continued, turning to the confused man, "but I happen to love horses and hate stupidity."

"You must not trouble yourself about my mare. I am not worth it," he said warmly.

She was not a bit disconcerted either by his warmth or his humility.

"Probably you are not, but I think the mare is," she said affably. "When we've seen to her well-being, I will take you into the house and show you some namesakes of yours who are very much like you."

"Mrs. Stanmer may not like——" he was beginning, but she checked him.

"Oh, I do as I like here; besides, Mrs. Stanmer is nodding over Aunt Ann's infatuation for a scoundrel. Perhaps you haven't read 'Aunt Ann'?"

He laughed. "There is one duty I never neglect; I always read my *Temple Bar*."

The girl smiled seriously. "The perfect fulfilment of that duty exonerates you from attacking others that are less pleasant, I suspect. Now, come, be quick. I have only ten minutes in which to show you the oak room and the Ogilvies."

She hurried him into the house, through the open door of a dismal oak-panelled room heavily hung with portraits, and, arresting his progress before one of these, she motioned with her hand from the canvas to himself with the introductory words:

"Barring the dress, which is a quarter of a century older than yours, let me make yourself and the portrait of the late Mr. Stanmer acquainted, Mr. Ogilvie. Now I must go back to the lawn. Marcroft will show you the other pictures. Good morning."

"God bless her! she sees I'm a gentleman and a true Ogilvie," said "Dick, the tramp" fervently to himself, as the stately self-possessed young lady went slowly from the room.

"Is that Miss Stanmer?" he asked of Marcroft, who was at his elbow.

"No, sir; it's Miss Davenport, the young lady who is to be Mrs. Stanmer, I believe; that is, we all think the old lady would like it."

"Ah!" was all Dick said aloud, but he thought:

"She lacks both Belle Warrener and Sylvia hollow as far as looks and action go, but I don't feel tempted to enter the lists against Mr. Stanmer for her, though her manner to me was devilish flattering, and many fellows would think——"

"You must please to come along now, sir, if you wish to see

any of the other rooms," Marcroft suggested respectfully; but Dick Ogilvie had seen enough already to satisfy him that he must be a member of the same family as the man who had changed his name to Stanmer to inherit Dene Prior.

"Confound the greedy old fellow for having wolfed my last quid; I shall have to change a fiver at the village inn," he muttered as he drove away from Dene Prior towards the village. "By Jove! what a lark it was, to be sure, playing Dick the tramp to a house consisting of Belle Warrener only. I wonder would she have looked after the mare as the future Mrs. Stanmer did to-day; there's real grit in that girl. I'm glad I'm not in love with her though, my little Sylvia's worth the lot of them."

CHAPTER XIII.

ANN'S ADVICE.

THERE was naturally a good deal said in Mrs. Gould's little establishment about the recovered ring, and the unjust suspicion which had temporarily attached to Ann. Now that she was proved not guilty on the unimpeachable evidence of Melling, the working jeweller, her fellow-servants displayed a good deal of sympathy for her, and some righteous indignation against Mr. Christopher for having offered her the affront of suspecting her of the theft. Ann herself said little on the subject, either to her fellows in the kitchen or to her mistress, when the latter expressed her intense satisfaction at Ann having come out of the compromising situation undefiled. But to Sylvia she was more communicative, and Sylvia felt frightened at some shadow which she could not define.

"You take my advice, Miss Sylvia," the woman broke out suddenly one day, "and when you're married don't let Mr. Christopher go on trying to pry out about that ring. May be there are those concerned in it who you wouldn't like to see brought to open disgrace."

"Then you do know something about it?" Sylvia cried vehemently.

"I know nothing, but I have my own thoughts, Miss Sylvia, and when a young lady takes the losing of her engagement ring as easy as you did, there's generally more than meets the eye. I felt sorry for you, that I did, Miss Sylvia, when I heard the person

who sold the ring wore a long black silk cloak. I couldn't help remembering that your mamma has got such a one——"

"You don't dare to hint that I was the person who sold my own ring," Sylvia cried out in a burst of mingled amazement, amusement, fury and fright.

"When people are as much in love as you are, Miss Sylvia.—and I know it: haven't you tried to make me your go-between with Dick Ogilvie?—they don't stick at a trifle. He is always wanting money, and you're too fond of him not to give it to him by hook or by crook. The quieter Mr. Christopher keeps about that ring, the better for you, I think."

There was such insolence subdued, yet apparent in the woman's tone and manner, that Sylvia was nettled into saying:

"I shall let Mr. Ogilvie know how insultingly you speak of him, and I shall tell my mother that you are dangerous and untrustworthy, as you dare to imply such things about me."

"Imply! Haven't you over and over again given me letters to post to Dick Ogilvie? You've run after that young man, Miss Sylvia, and he—he cared for another woman, only your flatteries made him fickle."

Sylvia looked her agitated attendant ruthlessly up and down. Then she laughed a light ringing laugh that had the desired effect of making Ann feel her own vulgarity and impotency. But what a mortified, helpless, hopeless *ache* that laugh attempted to conceal!

The immediate outcome of this conversation was that Sylvia made a spasmodic attempt to stay events by pleading with her mother to defer the marriage with Mr. Christopher for six months.

"At the end of six months I shall either be dead from misery or have trained myself down to endure being Mrs. Christopher. Do, mother! *do* put it off for six months."

"Oh, Sylvia! such a ridiculous, childish, inconsiderate, selfish caprice."

"It's all that and worse," Sylvia said stolidly; "but till I can get Dick Ogilvie out of my head I must be capricious in this way, or you must run the risk of my strangling Mr. Christopher. I can't endure the thought of the old brute coming near me."

"The scandal and disgrace will kill me, and Lily and you will go to the workhouse. Realize it, Sylvia. Think of all the

horrors of poverty which are before you if I die before you are settled in life. My income is an annuity, it dies with me. How are Lily and you to be protected and maintained when I am gone unless you have husbands to protect and maintain you?"

"But, mother, you're not going to die yet?"

"No, I trust not," Mrs. Gould said weepingly, being very much affected at the thought of her own demise; "if things go happily and prosperously with my children, I may reasonably look forward to a few more years of chequered bliss here below. *Such* a man as Mr. Christopher is, too! so honourable, so reliable, so steady."

"And so utterly unlike my poor Dick Ogilvie," Sylvia cut in, laughing ruefully. "Mother, I know it all. I love a ne'er-do-well; if I married him I know he would neglect me and break my heart, still I'm fool enough to wish to marry him. At any rate, I should have a few days of wild happiness, then he would be tired of me, probably go off after some other woman, and I should be able to say, 'I have lived and loved,' before I cut my throat."

"But it doesn't appear to me that he is anxious you should make this tragical sacrifice for him," her mother said coolly.

"Put my marriage off with Mr. Christopher and you'll see."

"Your wedding dress made and fitting perfectly! Your *trousseau* a picture for which I have to pay a price that will deprive me of the necessities of life for many a month to come."

"Sell it, sell it for what it will fetch; it's better than selling me. Mother, listen to me: I care more for Dick Ogilvie's old pet clay pipe than I do for Mr. Christopher's bulky old body and all his money. Help me not to marry Mr. Christopher. I'll do anything else you tell me to do; I'll earn my own living."

"How?" her mother interrupted quietly.

"How do other girls earn their living?"

"By teaching something—music, singing, dancing, recitations, cookery, needlework; but what do you know sufficiently well yourself to teach?"

"Nothing," Sylvia said humbly.

"Then, my child, what is there before you?"

"Mr. Christopher," Sylvia said hopelessly, and as she spoke her sister Lily came into the room.

"Sylvia, you lazy child, why haven't you been out this morning? I went for a walk in Kensington Gardens, and met Mr. Christopher. We walked up and down those lovely old avenues, and he told me about his place in Devonshire, where he means to live when you're married, Sylvia. It is *so* lovely, and *so* retired. The nearest railway station is three miles off, and you will have very few neighbours, and the few you have will be very stiff and stand-off, because Mr. Christopher is neither a 'county' or a 'service' man. But he says the air is lovely."

"I shall have a town house too?" Sylvia questioned aggressively.

"I don't know. He is thinking better of that town house. He thinks, and I agree with him, that a beautifully-appointed country home will give you a better status than a house that would be only one in ten thousand in London."

"Three miles from a railway station, with stiffish and stand-off neighbours!" Sylvia quoted.

Lily made a little gesture of exquisite scorn.

"What do the neighbours matter, you goose! With your husband's money you can entertain the smartest men in the garrison (that is if he will let you), and where smart men are to be found smart women will go. You needn't trouble your head about the neighbours."

"I am sure Mr. Christopher will never encourage Sylvia to cultivate fast and frivolous society," Mrs. Gould put in admonishingly; "military men are to be avoided by every young married woman who respects herself."

"How few young married women do respect themselves, then," Lily laughed softly. "Don't look so indignant, mamma, dear. You said that actors ought to be avoided by every girl who respected herself when Sylvia fell in love with Mr. Ogilvie."

"I wish you would look upon life more seriously and be less flippant, Lily. You can't conceive how I am worried and distressed by Sylvia's childish vacillation about Mr. Christopher—she wants me to put the marriage off for six months. How I am to break it to him I don't know."

"Shall I break it to him?"

"You!" exclaimed both Mrs. Gould and Sylvia.

"Why not I? I believe I could do it very nicely."

"Her *trousseau* ready, too!" Mrs. Gould nearly dropped a tear or two of vexation as she spoke.

"It's a pity the wedding dress should lie by for six months ; sleeves are sure to alter, and most likely the hang of the skirts will be different," Lily said thoughtfully. "I wonder if it would fit me? If it would it could be cut into a garden-party frock."

"Do try it on, Lily," Sylvia urged, "and if it fits you, wear it when you plead for a delay for me with Mr. Christopher."

"It would look silly to wear it when there was no occasion for it, and I never do anything that looks silly ; but I will try it on," Lily said seriously. "There's no knowing : it may come cheaper for you to give it to me, if Sylvia doesn't want it, than to get another."

"I shall not give in to Sylvia's caprices. I shall not defer the wedding for an hour," Mrs. Gould said, more sternly than she had ever permitted herself to speak to her daughters before, and Sylvia, instead of contesting the point, as her mother feared she would have done, merely shrugged her shapely young shoulders and murmured :

"Very well."

She took her trouble to Belle Warrener that night, opened her heart, not widely, but enough to let Belle see that it was bleeding and bruised, but not a bit contrite.

"If I could see Dick now and he said, 'Come with me, Sylvia,' I would go with him and brave all the scandal and mamma's displeasure without hesitation."

"I don't think you would be such a fool," Belle said.

"Yet you think it will be wrong of me to marry Mr. Christopher?"

"Very, *very* wrong—more than wrong, feeling as you do about that scamp. But if he said, 'Come,' and you went, you would be more than sorry for it the next day."

"You speak as if you knew something very bad about him. Tell it out. Don't beat about the bush. I suppose he has made love to you at some time or other, and now you are annoyed because he doesn't do it any longer. Oh, Belle, forgive me. I don't mean to be insulting, but when it comes to anything about my poor Dick, I lose my head, and the savage comes out in me. If I thought he had ever liked you, I should hate you."

"I think you will hate him when you hear how he behaved to

me," Belle said hotly. Then she told the story of Dick the tramp, the Rectory back lane, the water-meadow cattle-shed, broken meats and bottles of Bass. And when she had finished, Sylvia said calmly :

"I think you were very weak, but I don't blame *him* a bit. He only followed his calling, and acted for his daily bread. But you were horribly forward and bold to have let him kiss you——"

"I didn't let him," Belle interrupted indignantly.

"Well, he did it, whether you let him or not. It was only stage-business to him, and I don't see why you should blame him for it. He was awfully hard pressed at the time, poor fellow."

"Don't speak of him so tolerantly, Sylvia, and do be a dear little wise girl, and banish him from your heart and thoughts."

"I can't—I can't!" Sylvia said with desperate emphasis. "His face, and his trick of saying things, and his earnest eyes, come between me and everything. Oh, Belle, do tell me that when he kissed you, he didn't do it as if he loved you? It was acting? They were stage-kisses? Tell me so."

"They may have been stage-kisses for all I know. They were very unpleasant, and the only man I shall ever care for in this world saw them given to me, and threw me over from that day to this," Belle said regretfully.

"I should explain things to that man, if I were you, Belle. Tell him that to your certain knowledge Dick Ogilvie was just adoring another girl at the time—I can show letters to prove it—and the episode with you was merely a pastime—a bit of acting. He has told me often that, though he has to kiss pretty girls on the stage, it's mere 'business,' and he hates doing it."

"He didn't seem to hate kissing me," Belle said with reckless veracity.

The very memory of Dick's caresses was odious to her; at the same time she objected to the implication that they were bestowed in artistically cold blood in the mere way of "business."

"Poor Dick! Poor fellow! You say he was nearly starving that day. Isn't it awful to think of a man like Dick being hard-up and hungry?"

"He is very able-bodied—he could always have found work if he had looked for it, I should think."

"Not congenial work. Not such as a gentleman could take."

"Surely he might have found work more suited to his gentlemanly hands than cadging on a girl."

"Belle, you are rather coarse, and a little bit cruel to him," Sylvia cried, with tears in her eyes.

"And you are inclined to be a little bit too kind, Sylvia dear."

"Ah, you don't know what it is. When a man has told you that you have been his salvation, and saved his life, and that he's ready to give that life for you any day, what *can* you do?"

"Not believe him."

"That shows me he has never made real love to you, for if he had, you would believe him—you couldn't help it," Sylvia said triumphantly. "There must be something very good about him," she went on. "His mother idolizes him, and old Ann, who has known him ever since he was a baby, worships him. Don't you, Ann?" she asked, as the confidential servant came into the room.

"Don't I what, miss?"

"Worship Mr. Dick Ogilvie."

The blood came up in a scorching blush to Ann's swarthy cheeks.

"He's a blood relation of mine, and blood is thicker than water; but I'm not blind to his faults and his falseness, and it's a pity you are, Miss Sylvia. Mr. Christopher may be cumbersome to look at, but he's worth a hundred of Richard Ogilvie."

"Sylvia, it's degrading to let your servants speak to you in such a way," Belle said indignantly, as Ann went out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

And then Sylvia lamented, in an access of nerve and heart weariness, that she "had no one to turn to—no one, now Dick was gone."

(To be continued.)